Isaac Asimov on cloning

THE MAGAZINE OF

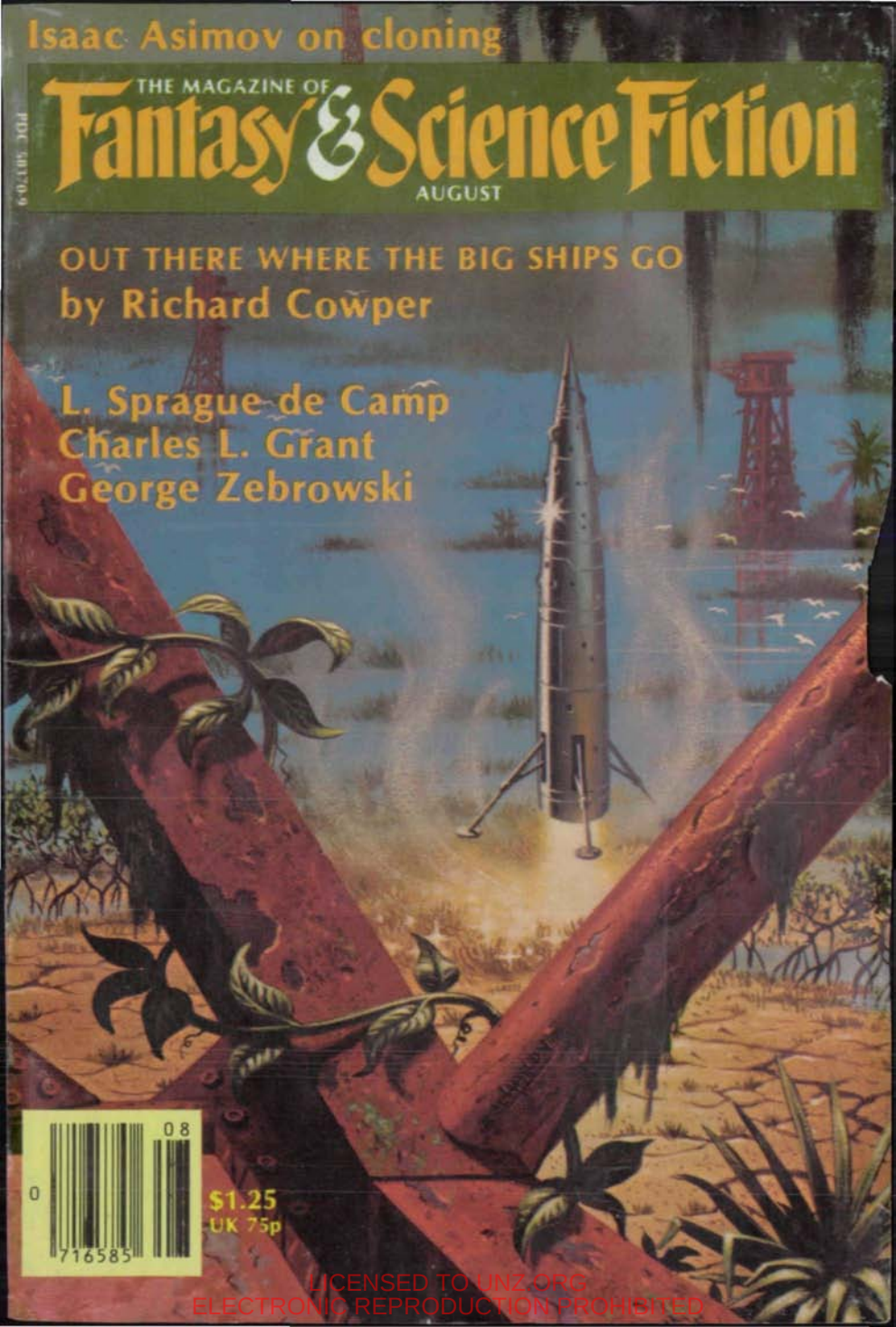
Fantasy & Science Fiction

AUGUST

FOUNDED 1949

OUT THERE WHERE THE BIG SHIPS GO
by Richard Cowper

L. Sprague de Camp
Charles L. Grant
George Zebrowski



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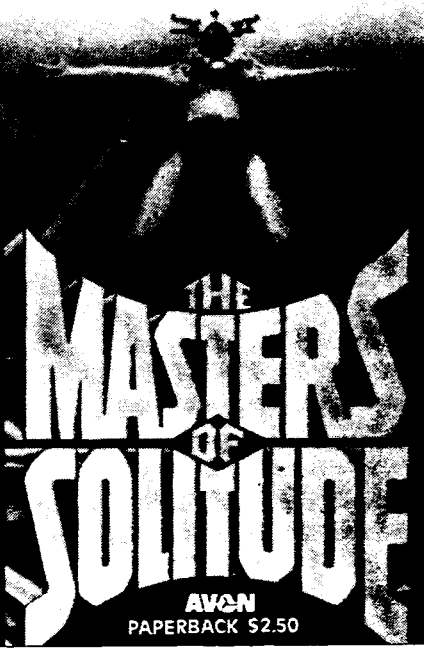

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Out Where

It was at breakfast on the second day that Roger first noticed the grey-haired man with the beard. He was sitting at the far corner table, partly shadowed by the filmy swag of the gathered gauze curtain. It was the ideal vantage point from which to observe what ever might be going on outside the long vista-window or to survey the guests as they came into the hotel dining room. But the bearded man was doing neither. He was just sitting, staring straight ahead of him, as though he could see right through the partition wall which divided the dining room from the hotel bar, and on out across the town and the azure bay to where the giant clippers unfurled their glittering metal sails and reached up to grasp the Northeast Trades.

"Don't stare, Roger. It's rude."

The boy flushed and made a play of unfolding his napkin and arranging it on his lap. "I wasn't staring," he muttered. "Just looking."

A young waiter with a sickle-shaped scar above his left eyebrow moved across from the buffet and stood deferentially at the shoulder of Roger's mother. He winked down at Roger, who smiled back at him shyly.

"You go on cruise today maybe, Senor? See *Los dedos de Dios*, hey?"

Roger shook his head.

Mrs. Herzheim looked up from the menu. "Is the fish real *fresh?*"

"*Si*, they bring him in this morning."

"We'll have that then. And grapefruits for starters. And coffee."

"*Si*, Senora." The young waiter flapped his napkin at Roger, winked again and hurried away.

Mrs. Herzheim tilted her head to one side and made a minuscule adjustment to one of her pearl eardrops. "What're your plans, honey?" she enquired lazily.

"I don't know, Mom. I thought maybe I'd—"

"Yoo-hoo, Susie! Over here!"

"Hi, Babs. Hi, Roger. Have you ordered, hon?"

"Yeah. We're having the fish. Where's Harry?"

"Collecting his paper."

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Here is a fine story about a starship that makes contact with an intelligent civilization and brings back to Earth a gift from beyond the stars, a gift in the form of a mysterious and compelling game called Kalire. Richard Cowper wrote "Piper at the Gates of Dawn," (March 1976), "The Hertford Manuscript," (October 1976), and, most recently, "Drink Me Francesca," (April 1978).

There the Big Ships Go

BY

RICHARD COWPER

The dining room was beginning to fill up, the waiters scurrying back and forth with laden trays, the air redolent with the aroma of fresh coffee and hot bread rolls. A slim girl with a lemon-yellow cardigan draped across her shoulders came in from the bar entrance. She was wearing tinted glasses, and her glossy, shoulder-length hair was the color of a freshly husked chestnut. She passed behind Roger's chair, threading her way among the tables until she had reached the corner where the bearded man was sitting. She pulled out a chair and sat down beside him so that her profile was towards the other guests and she was directly facing the window.

Roger watched the pair covertly. He saw the man lean forward and murmur something to the girl. She nodded. He then raised a finger, beckoned, and as though he had been hovering in readiness just for this, a waiter hurried over to their table. While they were giving their breakfast order, Roger's waiter reappeared with the grapefruits, a pot of coffee and a basket of rolls. As he was distributing them about the table, Susie Fogel signed to him.

He bent towards her attentively.

She twitched her snub nose in the direction of the corner table. "Is that who I think it is?" she murmured.

The waiter glanced swiftly round. "At the corner table? *Si*, Senora, that is him."

"Ah," Susie let out her breath in a

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quiet sigh.

"When did he arrive?"

"Late last night, Senora."

The waiter took her order and retreated in the direction of the kitchens. Mrs. Herzheim poured out a cup of coffee and handed it to Roger. As he was reaching for it, Harry Fogel appeared. He wished Roger and his mother a genial good morning and took the seat opposite his wife.

Susie lost no time in passing on her news.

Harry turned his head and scanned the couple in the corner. "Well, well," he said. "That must mean Guilio's around too. How's *that* for a turn-up?"

Roger said, "Who is he, Mr. Fogel?"

Harry Fogel's round face transformed itself into a parody of wide-eyed incredulity. "*Oi vai,*" he sighed. "Don't they teach you kids *any* history these days?"

Roger flushed and buried his nose in his grapefruit.

"Aw, come on, son." protested Harry. "Help an old man to preserve his illusions. Sure even a twelve-year-old's heard of *The Icarus?*"

Roger nodded, acutely conscious that his ears were burning.

"Well, there you are then. That's Mr. Icarus in person. The one and only. Come to add luster to our little tourney. Very big deal, eh, Babs?"

Roger's mother nodded, reached out for the sugar bowl and sprinkled more calories than she could reasonably afford over her grapefruit.

Roger risked another glance at the corner table. To his acute consternation the bearded man now appeared to be gazing directly across at him. For a moment their eyes met, and then, in the very act of glancing away, Roger thought he saw the old man lower his left eyelid ever so slightly.

At ten o'clock, Roger accompanied his mother to the youth salon. It was a trip he had been making in innumerable resorts for almost as long as he could remember. Hitherto, it had not occurred to him to resent it any more than it would have occurred to the poodles and chuhuahuas to resent their diamante studded leashes. Had anyone thought to ask him, he would probably have admitted that he genuinely enjoyed the warm, familiar femininity of the salons with their quiet carpets, their scents of aromatic waxes and lacquers, their whispered confessions which came creeping into his ears like exotic tendrils from beneath the anonymous helmets of the driers while, mouselike and unobserved, he turned the pages of the picture magazines. But today, when they reached the portico of the salon he suddenly announced: "I think I'll go on down to the harbor and take a look at the clippers, Mom."

Mrs. Herzheim frowned doubtfully. "All on your *own* honey? Are you *sure?* I mean it's — well...."

Roger smiled. "I'll be fine. You

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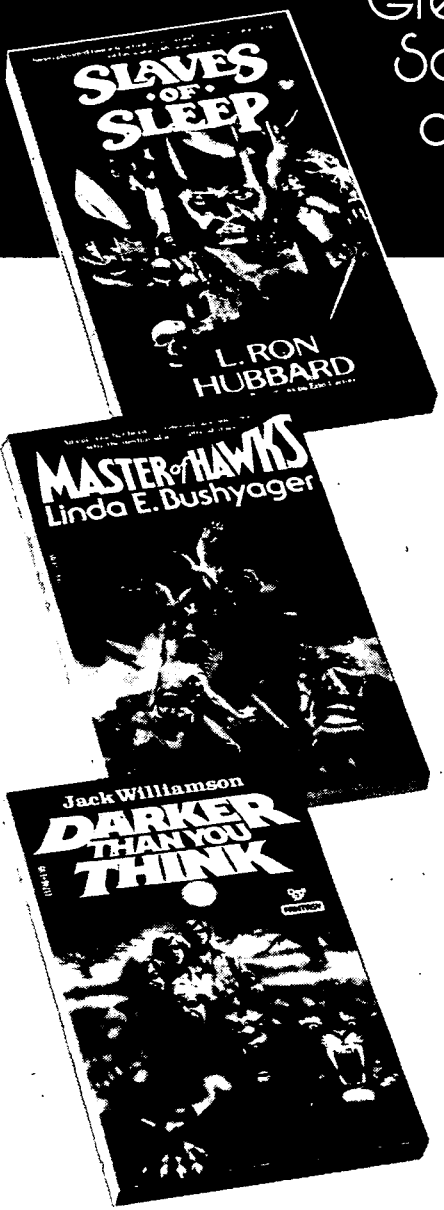

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don't have to worry about me."

"But we can go together this afternoon," she countered. "I'm looking forward to seeing those clippers too, honey."

Roger's smile remained inflexible, and suddenly it dawned upon his mother that the only way she would get him inside that salon would be to drag him in by main force. The realization shocked her profoundly. She gnawed at her bottom lip as she eyed askance her twelve-year-old son, who had chosen this moment to challenge, gently, her absolute authority over him. She consulted her Cartier wristwatch and sighed audibly. "Well, all right then," she conceded. "But you're to be right back here on this very spot at noon sharp. You hear that? Promise me, now."

Roger nodded. "Sure, Mom."

Mrs. Herzheim unclipped her handbag, took out a currency bill and passed it over. Roger folded it carefully, unzipped the money pouch on his belt and stuffed the note inside. "Thanks," he said.

They stood for a moment, eying each other thoughtfully; then Mrs. Herzheim leant forward and kissed him lightly on the forehead. "You're going to tell me all about it over lunch," she said. "I'm counting on it."

Roger grinned and nodded as he watched her turn and vanish through the swing doors of the salon; then he too turned lightly on his heel and began skipping down the cobbled street towards the harbor. After a few seconds he broke into a trot which gradually accelerated into a sort of wild, leaping dance which lasted until he hurtled out, breathless, through the shadow of an ancient arched gateway and found himself on the quayside.

He clutched at a stone stanchion while he got his breath back. Then he blinked his eyes and looked about him. The sunshine striking off the ripples was flinging a shifting web of light across the hulls of the fishing boats. The very air seemed to swirl like the seabirds as they circled and swooped and dived for floating fragments of fishgut. Dark-eyed women in gaudy shawls, brass combs winking in their black hair, shouted to one another across the water from the ornate iron balconies of the waterside tenements. Donkey carts rattled up and down the slabbed causeway. Huge swarthy men, sheathed in leather aprons, their bare arms a-shimmer with fish scales, trotted past crowned with swaying pagodas of baskets and flashed white teeth at him in gleaming grins. A posse of mongrels queued up to cock their legs against a shell-fish stall only to scatter, yelping, as the outraged owner swore and hurled an empty box at them. Roger laughed, relinquished his stanchion, and began dodging among the fishermen and the sightseers, heading past the dim and echoing warehouses towards the light tower on the inner harbor mole.

When he reached his goal he sat

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THEY WERE THE COVENERS, THE CIRCLE FOLK
THEY HAD A BEAUTY AND THEY WORSHIPPED LIFE
THEIR JOY WAS IN THE PAST,
THEIR GREATNESS YET TO COME.
BECAUSE THEY WERE DYING,
BECAUSE LIFE PLAYS NO FAVORITES,
THEY GAMBLED ON TOMORROW
AT A PLACE CALLED DANNYLINE...

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down and drew a deep breath of pure delight. On a rock ledge some ten meters beneath him, two boys of about his own age were fishing. He watched them for a moment, then raised his eyes and looked up at the dark volcanic hills. He noted the scattering of solar "sunflower" generators; the distant globe of the observatory; the tumbling, trade-driven clouds; the lime-washed houses clambering on each other's shoulders up the steep hillside; the great hotels squatting smugly high above. By screwing up his eyes he just managed to make out in one of them the shuttered windows of the rooms which, for the next fortnight, were to be his and his mother's.

Suddenly, for no particular reason, he found himself remembering the old man and the girl with auburn hair. He tried to recall what he had read about *The Icarus*, but apart from the fact that she had been the last of the starships, he could not recall very much. As Mr. Fogel had said, that was history, and history had never been his favorite subject. But there was something about that grey-haired, bearded man which would not let his mind alone. And suddenly he knew what it was! "He just wasn't *seeing* us," he said aloud. "He didn't *care!*"

Hearing his voice, the two boys below glanced up *"Cigarillo, Senor?"* one called hopefully.

Roger smiled and shook his head apologetically.

The boys looked at one another, laughed, shouted something he could not understand, and returned to their fishing.

Far out to sea, sunlight twinkled from the dipping topsails of an eight-masted clipper. Roger thrust out his little finger at the full stretch of his arm and tried to estimate her speed, counting silently to mark off the seconds it took her to flicker out of his sight and back again. Twenty-four. And an eight-master meant at least 200 meters overall. Two hundred in twenty-four seconds would be one hundred in twelve would be... five hundred in a minute. Multiply 500 by 60 and you got... 30 kilometers an hour. Just about average for the Northeast Trade route. But, even so, six days from now she would be rounding Barbados and sniffing for the Gulf. Very quietly he began to hum the theme of *Trade Winds*, the universal hit of a year or two back, following the great ship with his dreaming eyes as she dipped and soared over the distant swells and vowing that one day he too would be in command of such a vessel, plunging silver-winged along the immemorial trade routes of the world.

He sat gazing out to sea long after the great ship had slipped down out of sight below the horizon. Then with a sigh he climbed to his feet and began making his way back along the harbor, dimly conscious that some part of him was still out there on the ocean but not yet sufficiently self-aware to know which part it was.

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A clock in a church tower halfway up the hillside sent its noonday chimes fluttering out over the roofs of the town like a flock of silver birds. Roger suddenly remembered his promise to his mother and broke into a run.

Mrs. Herzheim discovered that the youth salon had given her a headache. So after lunch she retired to her bedroom leaving Roger to spend the afternoon by the hotel pool. He had it to himself; most of the other guests having opted for one or other of the organized excursions to the local beauty spots, or, like Roger's mother, chosen to rest up prior to the ardors of the night's session.

Roger swam the eight lengths he had set himself, then climbed out and padded across to the loafer where he had left his towel and his micomicon. Who was it to be? He sat down, gave a cursory scrub to his wet hair, then flipped open the back of the cabinet and ran his eye down the familiar index. Nelson, Camelot, Kennedy, Pasteur, Alan Quartermain, Huck Finn, Tarzan, Frodo, Titus Groan — his finger hovered and a voice seemed to whisper deep inside his head *"each flint a cold blue stanza of delight, each feather, terrible....* He shivered and was on the point of uncoiling the agate earplugs when he heard a splash behind him. He glanced round in time to see the head of the girl who had shared the old man's breakfast table emerging from the water. A slim brown hand came up, palmed the wet hair from her eyes; then she turned over on her back and began threshing the water to a glittering froth, forging down the length of the pool towards him.

Five meters out, she stopped kicking and came gliding in to the edge under her own impetus. She reached up, caught hold of the tiled trough, and turned over. Her head and the tops of her shoulders appeared above the rim of the pool. She regarded Roger thoughtfully for a moment then smiled. "Hello there."

"Hi," said Roger.

"Not exactly crowded, is it?"

"They're all out on excursions," he said, noting that she had violet eyes. "Or taking a siesta."

"All except us."

"Yes," he said. "Except us."

"What's your name?"

"Roger Herzheim."

"Mine's Anne. Anne Henderson."

"I saw you at breakfast this morning," he said. "You were with...."

She wrinkled her nose like a rabbit. "My husband. We saw you too."

Roger glanced swiftly round. "Is — is he coming for a swim too?"

"Pete? No, he's up at the observatory."

Roger nodded. "Are you here on holiday?"

She flicked him a quick, appraising glance. "Well, sort of. And you?"

"Mom's playing in the tourney. She's partnering Mr. Fogel."

"And what do *you* do, Roger?"

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"Oh, I come along for the trips. In the vacations, that is."

"Don't you get bored?"

"Bored?" he repeated. "No."

The girl paddled herself along to the steps and climbed out. She was wearing a minute token costume of gold beeswing, and the sunlight seemed to drip from her. She skipped across and squatted down beside him. "May I see?" she asked, pointing to the micomicon.

"Sure," said Roger amicably. "I guess they'll seem a pretty old-fashioned bunch to you."

She peered at the spool index and suddenly said, "Hey! You've got one of mine there!"

"Yours?"

"Sure. I played Lady Fuchsia in *Titus* for Universal."

Roger stared at her with the sort of absorbed attention a connoisseur might have given to a rare piece of Dresden. "You," he repeated tonelessly. "You're Lady Fuchsia?"

"I *was*," she laughed. "For nine solid months. Seven years ago. It was my first big part. Gail Ferguson. You'll find me among the credits."

"I wiped those off," he said. "I always do."

She glanced up at him sideways. "How old are you, Roger?"

"Twelve and a half."

"You like *Titus*, do you?"

"It's my favorite. Easily."

"And Fuchsia?"

He looked away from her out to where the distant aluminized dishes of the solar generators, having turned past the zenith, were now tracking the sun downhill towards the west. "I wish..." he murmured and then stopped.

"What do you wish?"

"Nothing," he said.

"Go on. You can tell me."

He turned his head and looked at her again. "I don't know how to say it," he muttered awkwardly. "Not without seeming rude, I mean."

Her smile dimmed a little. "Oh, go on," she said. "I can take it."

"Well, I just wish you hadn't told me, that's all. About you being Fuchsia, I mean."

"Ah," she said and nodded. There was a long pause, then: "You know, Roger, I think that's about the nicest compliment anyone's ever paid me."

Roger blinked. "Compliment?" he repeated.

"Really?"

"Really. You're saying I made Fuchsia come alive for you. Isn't that it?"

He nodded. "I guess so."

"Here. Close your eyes a minute," she said. "Listen." Her voice changed, not a lot, but enough, became a litle dry and husky. *Sunflower*, she murmured sadly, *Sunflower who's broken, I found you, so drink some water up, and then you won't die — not so quickly anyway. If you do I'll bury you anyway. I'll dig a long grave and bury you. Pentecost will give me a*

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spade. If you don't die you can stay...."

She watched his face closely. "There," she said, in her own voice. "You see? Fuchsia exists in me and apart from me: in you and apart from you. Outside of time. She won't grow older like the rest of us."

Roger opened his eyes. "You speak about her as if she was real," he said wonderingly.

"Real!" There was a sudden, surprising bitterness in the girl's voice. "I don't know what the word means. Do you?"

"Why, yes," he said, puzzled by the change in her tone. "You're real. So am I. And this" — he waved a hand towards the pool and the hotel — "that's real."

"What makes you so sure?"

He suspected that she was laughing at him. "Well, because I can touch it," he said.

"And that makes it real?"

"Sure."

She lifted her arm and held it out to him. "Touch me, Roger."

He grinned and laid his right hand lightly on the sun-warmed flesh of her forearm. "You're real, all right."

"That's very reassuring," she said. "No, I mean it. Some days I don't feel real at all." She laughed. "I should have you around more often, shouldn't I?"

She stood up, walked to the edge of the pool, flexed her coral-tipped toes and plunged in, neatly and without fuss.

Roger watched her slender body flickering, liquid and golden against the tiled floor. Then he snapped shut the micomicon, sprinted across the paved surround, and dived to join her.

The tourney was due to start at eight o'clock. Mrs. Herzheim was all a-flutter because she had just learnt that she and Harry Fogel were drawn against the co-favorites in her section for the first round. "Do you think it's a good omen, Roger?" she asked. "Be honest now."

"Sure, Mom. A block conversion at the very least."

"Wouldn't that be marvelous? Certain sure Harry would muff it though. Like that time in Reykjavik, remember? I could've *died!*" She leant close to the dressing table mirror and caressed her eyelashes with her mascara brush. "You going to watch So-Vi, honey?"

"I expect so."

Mrs. Herzheim eyed her reflection critically and then sighed. "That's the best you'll do, girl. Can't turn mutton into lamb. How do I look, baby?"

"You look great."

"That's my pet." She restored the mascara brush to its holder and zipped up her toilet case. "Well, all you can do for me now is to wish me luck, honey."

"Good luck, Mom."

She walked over to the bed where her son was lying, bent over and kissed him, but lightly so as to avoid smearing her lips. "I'll mouse in so's not to

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wake you," she said.

He smiled and nodded and she went out, wafting him a final fingertip kiss from the doorway.

Roger lay there for a few minutes, his fingers laced behind his head, and gazed up at the ceiling. Then he got up from his mother's bed and walked through into his own room. From the drawer of the bedside cabinet he took out his recorder, ran it back for a while and listened to the letter to his father which he had started taping the previous evening. He added a description of his visit to the harbor and was about to move on to his meeting with Anne Henderson when he suddenly changed his mind. He switched off the recorder, went back into his mother's room and retrieved his micomicon. Having slotted home the *Titus* cartridge, he uncoiled the earphones and screwed the plugs into his ears. Then he lay on the bed, reached down, pushed the button which activated the mechanism, and, finally, dragged the goggles down over his eyes.

At once the familiar magic began to work. The wraiths of milk-white mist parted on either side; gnarled specters of ancient trees emerged and lolloped past to the slow pacing of his horse; he heard the bridle jingle and the whispering waterdrops pattering down upon the drifts of dead and decaying leaves. At any moment now he would emerge upon the escarpment and, gazing down, behold by the sickly light of a racing moon, the enormous crouching beast of stone that was the castle of Gormenghast. Then, swooping like some huge and silent night bird down over the airy emptiness and up again towards the tiny pinprick of light high up in the ivied bastion wall, he would gaze in through the latticed, candlelit window of Fuchsia's room. He heard the telltale rattle of the pebble dislodged, and the mist veils thinned abruptly to a filmy gauze. He had reached the forest's edge. His horse moved forward one more hesitant pace and stood still, awaiting his command. He leant forward and was about to peer down into The Valley That Never Was when the vision dimmed abruptly and, a second later, had flickered into total darkness.

Roger swore, dragged off the goggles and hoisted the machine up from the floor beside the bed. The ruby telltale was glowing like a wind-fanned spark. He pushed the OFF button, and the light vanished. He stared glumly at the all-but-invisible thread, then activated the rewind mechanism and plucked the slender cartridge from its slot. Perhaps he would be able to find a repair depot in the town somewhere. It did not seem likely. He unfastened the earplugs, restored them to their foam-molded cache beside the goggles and closed up the inspection panel. Then he let himself out into the corridor and rode the elevator down to the reception hall.

His spirits revived a little when the desk clerk informed him that there was

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indeed a Universal Elektronix shop in the town. He added regretfully that, so far as he knew, it ran no all-night service. Roger thanked him and was about to head for the So-Vi lounge when an impulse persuaded him to change his mind and he walked out on to the terrace instead.

The sun had set a quarter of an hour past, but the western horizon was still faintly fringed with a pale violet glow that deepened precipitately to indigo. Directly overhead, the equatorial stars were trembling like raindrops on the twigs of an invisible tree. Roger walked slowly to the edge of the pool and gazed down at the quivering reflections of unfamiliar constellations. The air was soft and warm, balmy with the scent of spice blossom. From somewhere on the dark hillside below him he could hear the sound of a guitar playing and a girl's voice singing. He listened, entranced, and suddenly, unaccountably, he was struggling in the grip of an overwhelming sadness, an emotion all the more poignant because he could ascribe it to no specific cause. He felt the unaccustomed pricking of tears behind his eyelids and he stumbled away towards the dark sanctuary of the parapet which divided the pool area from the steeply terraced flower gardens.

There was a flight of steps, carpeted with some small creeping plant, which he remembered led down to a stone bench where earlier he had seen a small green lizard sunning itself. He scuttled down into the comforting shadows, skirted a jasmine bush and, with eyes not yet fully adjusted to the deeper darkness, felt his cautious way forward. The bench was occupied.

The shock of this discovery froze the sob in his throat. His heart gave a great painful leap and he stared, open-mouthed, at the suddenly glowing end of a cigar. There was a faint chuckle from the shadows, and a deep voice said, "Well, hello there. Roger, isn't it?"

Roger swallowed. "I'm sorry, sir," he gulped. "I didn't know...."

"Sure you didn't. Why should you? So help yourself to a seat, son. And mind the bottle."

Roger hesitated for a moment, then edged carefully forward and sat down on the very far end of the bench.

"Saw you at breakfast, didn't I?" said the voice, and added, parenthetically: "The name's Henderson, by the way."

"Yes, sir," said Roger. "I know. You're The Master."

"Ah," said the voice thoughtfully. There was a long pause, then: "So, tell me, what brings you out roaming in the gloaming?'

Roger said nothing.

"Me, I come to look at the stars," said the old man. "That sound crazy to you?"

"No, sir."

The cigar flower bloomed bright scarlet and slowly faded. "Well, it does

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to a lot of people," said the deep voice, once more disembodied.

"Not to me," said Roger, surprised to hear how firm his own voice sounded.

There was a clink of glass against glass, followed by a brisk gurgle. "Care for a mouthful of wine?"

"No, thank you, sir."

There was a moment of silence and then the sound of a glass being set down again. "I gather you met Anne this afternoon."

"Yes, sir."

"You like her?"

"Yes, sir," Roger affirmed fervently.

"Beautiful, isn't she?"

Roger said nothing, partly because he could think of nothing to say, partly because he had just realized that his recollection of touching Anne's sun-warmed arm had been a primal cause of his sudden loneliness.

"Well, she is," said The Master. "And let me assure you, Roger, I know what I'm talking about."

"Yes, she's lovely," murmured Roger, and wondered where she was now.

"Beauty isn't just *shape*, boy. It's spirit too. A sweet harmony. Did you know that?"

"I — I'm not sure I know what you mean, sir."

"Well, take The Game. What grade are you, Roger?"

"Thirty-second Junior, sir."

"Ever make a clear center star?"

"I did nearly. About a year ago."

"How'd it feel?"

"I don't really know, sir. It just sort of happened. I wasn't even thinking about it."

"Of course not. It's a sort of natural flow. You lose yourself in it. That's the secret of The Game, boy. Losing yourself." The cigar tip described a rosy, fragrant arabesque in the air and ended up pointing toward the heavens. "Out there beyond Eridanus. That's where I found that out. Might just as well have stayed at home, hey?" Again the glass clinked. "How old are you, son?"

Roger told him.

"Know how old I am?"

"No, sir."

"Take a guess."

Roger groped. "Sixty."

The Master gave a brusque snort of laughter and said, "Well, I'm surely flattered to hear you say so, Roger. Tell me, do the names Armstrong and Aldrin mean anything to you?"

"No, sir."

The Master sighed. "And why should they, indeed? But when I was your age, they were just about the two most famous names on this whole planet. '68 that was — the year all the kids in our neighborhood grew ten feet tall overnight!" He gave another little mirthless snort. "We were the ones who bought the dream, Roger, the whole goddamn, star-dream package, lock, stock and barrel. And in the end one or two of us even got there. The chosen few. Hand-picked. Know what

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they called us? Knights of the Grail!" He spat out into the darkness, and a moment later the tiny furnace of the cigar glowed bright and angry as he dragged hard at the invisible teat.

"Like Sir Lancelot and Sir Gawain?" suggested Roger timidly.

"Maybe," said The Master. "All I know is they told us we'd been privileged to live out man's eternal dream on his behalf. And we believed them! Thirty-nine years old I was, boy, and I still swallowed that sort of crud! Can you credit it?"

Some small creature rustled dryly in the jasmine bush and was silent again. Down below in the scarf of shadow that lay draped across the shoulder of the hill between the hotel and the twinkling lights of the town, the sound of the girl's voice came again, singing sweetly and sadly to the accompaniment of the plucked strings.

Roger said, "What was it *really* like out there, sir?"

There was a pause so long that Roger was beginning to wonder whether the old man had heard his question, then: "There comes a moment, boy, when for the life of you you can't pick out the sun from all the rest of them. That's when the thread snaps and you slip right through the fingers of God. There's nothing left for you to relate to. But if you've been well-trained, or you're as thick as two planks, or maybe just plain lucky, you come through that and out on the other side. But something's happened to you. You don't know what's *real* any more. You get to wondering about the nature of Time and how old you *really* are. You question everything. But *everything*. And in the end, if you're like me, the dime finally drops and you realize you've been conned. And that's the second moment of truth."

"Conned?"

"That's right, son. Conned. Cheated. Hood-winked. Look." He took the cigar from between his lips and blew upon the smoldering cone of ash until it glowed bright red. "Now what color would you say that was?"

"Why, red, of course."

"No. I'm telling you you're wrong. That's blue. Bright blue."

"Not *really*," said Roger.

"Yes, really," said The Master. "You only say it's red because you've been told that's what red is. For you blue is something else again. But get enough people to say that's blue, and it *is* blue. Right?"

"But it's still red, really," said Roger, and gave a nervous little hiccup of laughter.

"It's what it is," said The Master somberly. "Not what anyone *says* it is. That's what I discovered out there. Sometimes I think it's all I did discover."

Roger shifted uneasily on the stone bench. "But you said...." he began and then hesitated. "I mean when you said before about spirit... about its being beautiful...."

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"That too," admitted The Master. "But it's the same thing."

Was it? Roger had no means of knowing.

"Spirit's just another way of saying "quality" — something everyone recognizes and no one's ever defined. You can recognize quality, can't you, Roger?"

"I — I'm not sure, sir."

"Sure you're sure. You recognized it in Anne, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes."

"I suspect it's what you were out looking for down by the harbor this morning. It's what brought you out here tonight when you could have been sitting there snug and pie-eyed in front of the So-Vi with all the rest of the morons."

"My micomicon broke," said Roger truthfully.

The Master chuckled. "You win, son," he said.

"Did you know that Anne was Lady Fuchsia in *Titus Groan?*"

"She was?"

"Yes. She told me this afternoon. I was going to see if it seemed any different now I know."

"Ah," said The Master. "And was it?"

"I don't know. The spool broke before I got to her."

"That's life, son," said The Master, and again gave vent to one of his explosive snorts of laughter. "Just one long series of broken spools. You're here for the tourney, are you?"

"Mom is."

"And your father?"

"He's in Europe — Brussels. He's a World Commodity Surveyor. He and mom are separated."

"Ah." The sound was a verbal nod of understanding.

"I get to go on vacation with him twice a year. We have some great times together. He gave me the micomicon. He's fixing a clipper trip for us next spring."

"You're looking forward to that, are you?"

Roger sighed ecstatically, seeing yet again in his mind's eye the silver-winged sea-bird dipping and soaring over the tumbling, trade-piled Atlantic hills, wreathed in spraybows.

"You like the sea?"

"More than anything," avowed Roger. "One day I'm going to be master of my own clipper."

The cigar glowed and a pennant of aromatic smoke wavered hesitantly in the vague direction of far-off Eridanus. "That's your ambition, is it?"

"Yes, sir," said Roger simply.

"And how about The Game?"

Before Roger could come up with an answer, a voice called down from the terrace above them: "Hey! Isn't it time you were getting robed-up, Pete?"

"I guess it must be, if you say so," responded The Master.

"Guilio's in the hall already. Who's that down there with you?"

"A fan of yours, I gather."

"Roger?"

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"Hello," said Roger.

With a faint groan The Master rose from the bench, dropped his cigar butt on the stone-slabbed parterre and screwed it out beneath the sole of his shoe. Then he picked up his glass and the almost empty wine bottle. With eyes now fully accustomed to the gloom, Roger saw that the old man was bowing gravely towards him. "I must beg you to excuse me, Roger," he said, "but as you will have realized, duty calls. I have greatly enjoyed our conversation. We shall meet again. Perhaps tomorrow, heh?"

"Thank you, sir. Good luck."

"Luck?" The Master appeared to consider the implications of the courtesy for a moment. He smiled. "It's a long, long time since anybody wished me that, Roger. But thank you, nontheless."

Mercifully the darkness hid the bright flush of mortification on the boy's cheeks.

The Master and his challenger, Guilio Romano Amato, sat facing each other on a raised dais at one end of the tourney hall, separated from the other players by a wide swath of crimson carpet and the token barrier of a thick, gilded cord. On the wall above their heads a huge electronic scoreboard replicated the moves in this, the third session of the Thirty-Third World Kalire Championship.

Besides the two contestants seven other people shared the dais: the Supreme Arbitrator, The Master's two Seconds, Amato's Seconds, and the two Official Scorekeepers, one of whom was Anne. They all sat cross-legged on cushions at a discreet distance from the two principals. If they were conscious that their every movement, every facial expression, was being relayed by satellite to a million Kalire temples around the world, they evidenced no sign of it. They dwelt apart, isolated, enthralled by the timeless mystery and wonder of The Game of Games, the Gift from Beyond the Stars.

Into those silent, fathomless, interstellar reaches, the mere contemplation of which had once so terrified Pascal, Man in the person of The Master had dared to dip his arm. Two full centuries later, long after he had been given up for dead, he had returned to Earth, bearing with him the inconceivable Grail he had gone to seek.

He had emerged to find a world exhausted and ravaged almost beyond his recognition — a world in which the fabulous mission of *The Icarus* had dwindled to little more than an uneasy folk memory of what was surely the purest and most grandiloquent of all the acts of folly ever perpetrated in the whole crazy history of the human race.

When the great starship, scorched and scarred from its fantastic odyssey, had finally dropped flaming out of the skies to settle as gently as a seed of thistledown upon its original launching

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site on the shore of Lake Okeechobee, few who witnessed its arrival could bring themselves wholly to believe the evidence that was so manifestly there before them. The huge, tarnished, silver pillar standing there among the rusting debris and the crumbling gantries whispered to them of those days, long since past, when their forefathers still had the capacity to hope.

A hastily convened reception committee had driven out to welcome the wanderers home. Grouped in a self-conscious semicircle on the fissured and weed-ribbed concrete of the ancient launch pad, the delegation stood waiting for the port to open and the Argonauts to descend.

At last the moment came. The hatch inched open, slowly cranking itself back to reveal a solitary figure standing framed in the portal and gazing down upon them.

"Who is it?" They whispered to one another. "Dalgleish? Martin? No, I'll swear that's Henderson himself. God, he hardly looks a day older than the pictures, does he? Are you *sure* it's him? Yeah, that's Henderson all right. Christ, it doesn't seem possible, does it?"

And then someone had started to clap. In a moment everyone had joined in, beating the palms of their hands together in the dry, indifferent air.

Thirty feet above them, Peter Henderson, Commander of *The Icarus*, heard the strange, uncoordinated pattering of their applause and slowly raised his left hand in hesitant acknowledgement. It was then that some sharp-eyed observer noted that beneath his right arm he was carrying what appeared to be an oblong wooden box.

At first practically nobody took Henderson seriously, and who could blame them? Yet the memory banks of *The Icarus* appeared to confirm much of what he said. The gist of it was that out there, beyond Eridanus, on a planet they had called "Dectire III," they had finally discovered that which they had gone forth to seek. The form it took was that of a fabulous city which they called "Eidothea," a city which, if Henderson was to be believed, was nothing less than all things to all men. It was inhabited by a race of gentle, doe-eyed creatures who differed from themselves only in being androgynous and in possessing an extra finger upon each hand. They were also, by human standards, practically immortal. The Eidotheans were the professed devotees of an hermaphrodite deity they called Kalirinos, who, they maintained, held sway over one half of the existing universe. The other half was the ordained territory of her counterpart (some said her identical twin) Arimanos. Kalirinos and Arimanos were locked in an eternal game of Kalire (The Game) whose counters were nothing less than the galaxies, the stars and the planets of the entire cosmos. By reaching Eidothea, human-

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ity, in the persons of the crew of *The Icarus*, had supplied the evidence that their species was ready to join The Game and, by so doing, to take another step up the evolutionary ladder.

There had followed a period of roughly six months devoted to their initiation and instruction in the rudiments of Kalire, at the end of which Henderson alone had gained admission to the very lowest Eidothean rank of proficiency in The Game — a grade approximately equivalent by our own standards to the First Year Primary Division. After his victory he had been summoned before the High Council, presented with his robe of initiation, with the board marked out in the one hundred and forty-four squares, each of which has its own name and ideogram, and with the box containing the one hundred and forty-three sacred counters, colored red on one side and blue on the other, which alone constitute the pure notes from which the divine harmonies of The Game of Games are derived. "And now you shall return to your own world," they had told him, "and become the teacher of your people. Soon, if we have judged correctly, your world will be ready to take its place in the timeless federation, and Kalirinos will smile upon you."

Henderson had protested passionately that he was wholly unworthy of such an honor, but the truth was that he could not bear the thought of having to tear himself away from the exquisite delights of Kalire, which, like those of the fabled lotus, once they have been enjoyed, must claim the soul forever. However, the Eidotheans had seemingly been prepared for this. The commander was placed in a mild hypnotic trance, carried aboard *The Icarus*, and the ships's robot brain was instructed to ferry him back to his own planet. The rest of the crew were graciously permitted to remain behind in Paradise.

Within the terms of the eternal symbolic struggle between Kalirinos and Arimanos (and certainly against all the odds), the conversion of the Earth was accomplished with a swiftness roughly commensurate to the reversal of a single counter upon the Divine Board. Within twenty-four hours of his setting foot once more upon his native soil, Commander Henderson had been interviewed upon International So-Vi. There, before the astonished eyes of about a billion skeptical viewers, he had unfolded his board, set down his four opening counters in the prescribed pattern, and had given an incredulous world its very first lesson in Kalire.

The Japanese, with their long tradition of Zen and Go, were the first to become enmeshed in the infinite subtleties of The Game, and within a matter of weeks the great toy factories of Kobe and Nagoya were churning out Kalire sets by the million. The Russians and Chinese were quick to follow. And

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then — almost overnight it seemed — the whole world had gone Kalire-crazy. It leapt across all barriers of language and politics, demanding nothing, offering everything. Before it armies were powerless, creeds useless. Time-hallowed mercenary values, ancient prejudices, long-entrenched attitudes of mind — all these were suddenly revealed as the insubstantial shadows of a childhood nightmare. Kalire was all. But was it a religion, or a philosophy, or just a perpetual diversion? The answer surely is that it was all these things and more besides. The deeper one studied it, the more subtle and complex it became. Layer upon layer upon layer of revelation awaited the devotee, and yet there was always the knowledge that however profoundly he delved he would never uncover the ultimate penetralia of the mystery.

Soon international tourneys were being organized, and the champions started to emerge. They too competed among themselves for the honor of challenging Peter Henderson. The first contender so to arise was the Go Master, Subi Katumo. He played six games with Henderson and lost them all. From that point on Henderson was known simply as "The Master." He traveled the world over playing exhibition games and giving lectures to rapt audiences. He also founded the Kalirinos Academy at Pasedena, where he instructed his disciples in those fundamental spiritual disciplines so vital to the mastery of the art of Kalire and into which he himself had been initiated by the Eidotheans. He wrote a book which he called *The Game of Games* and prefaced it with a quotation taken from "The Paradoxes of the Negative Way" by St. John of the Cross —

In order to become that which thou art not,

Thou must go by a way which thou knowest not....

The *Game of Games* became a world best-seller even before it had reached the bookshops, and within six months of publication had been translated into every language spoken on Earth.

And so Henderson grew old. Now, in the thirty-fourth year of his return, at the physical age of seventy-eight, he was defending his title yet again. His challenger, Guilio Amato, the twenty-eight-year-old Neapolitan, was the premier graduate from the Kalirinos Academy. In his pupil's play The Master had detected for the first time a hint of that ineffable inner luminosity which others ascribe to genius but which he himself recognized as supreme quality. Having recognized it, he dared to permit himself the luxury of hoping that his long vigil might at last be drawing to its close.

So far, they had played two games of the ordained six: one in Moscow and one in Rome. The Master had won both. But in each, in order to ensure victory, he had had to reach deeper

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than ever before into his innermost resources for a key to unlock his pupil's strategy. Now the third game had reached its critical third quarter. If The Master won (and who could doubt that he would?), the title would remain his. Even if, by some miracle, Amato managed to win the three remaining games, the resulting draw would still count as a victory for the title holder. To state the matter in a way wholly foreign to the spirit of the contest — let alone of Kalire itself — to keep his chances alive, Amato had to win this third game.

Such was the situation when The Master, having entered the hall, bowed to the Supreme Arbitrator, sat down, touched hands formally across the board with his challenger and then accepted the envelope containing Amato's sealed move. He opened it, scanned the paper, nodded to his pupil, and permitted himself the ghost of a smile. It was exactly the move he had expected. He leant forward and placed a blue counter upon the designated square. On the display board above their heads a blue light winked on and off. A faint sigh went up from the main body of the hall. The struggle was rejoined.

Immediately after breakfast the following morning, Roger took his micomicon down to the depôt in the town and left it for the broken spool to be repaired. Having been assured that it would be ready for him to collect within the hour, he elected to retrace his path of the previous day, wandering out along the stone-flagged quay to where the mole jutted out across the harbor mouth.

The morning sun was shining just as brilliantly upon the flanks of the volcanic hills and scooping up its shimmering reflections from the restlessly looping wavelets in the inner basin; the brightly shawled women were still crying out to each other in their strange parrot-patios from their ornate balconies; the gulls were still shrieking and swirling as they dived for the scraps; ostensibly it was all just as it had been the day before. And yet the boy was conscious that, in some not quite definable way, things were subtly different. Something had changed. Frowning, he scanned the horizon for signs of clippers plying the trade route but could see nothing. Then, moved by a sudden impulse, he clambered over the parapet and scrambled down the rocks to the ledge where he had last seen the two boys fishing.

There were dried fish scales glinting like chips of mica on the rocks, and he picked one or two of them off with his fingernail. Having examined them, he flipped them into the green, rocking waters below him. Then he squatted down, cupped his chin in his hands and stared down at the flickering shadows of the little fish as they came darting to the surface attracted by the glittering morsels.

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He thought of Anne finning her golden way across the bottom of the sunlit pool, and from there his memory winged on to the curious conversation he had had with the old man. As he started to recall it, he began to realize that it was his recollection of their meeting in the darkness which had contrived to insinuate itself between him and the brilliant scene about him. "It's what it *is*, not what anyone *says* it is." What was that supposed to mean? And how could red *be* blue? Even if everyone *called* it blue, it would still *be* red. Or would it? A sharp splinter of sunlight struck dazzling off a wave straight into his eyes. He covered them with his hands, and suddenly, bright as an opal on his retina, he seemed to see again the glowing spark of The Master's cigar and above it the shape of the bearded lips blowing it brighter. Yet, even as he followed the point of light, its color began to change, becoming first mauve, then purple, and finally a brilliant aquamarine. And yet, indisputably, it was still the original spark.

He opened his eyes wide, blinked, and gazed about him. As he did so, he heard a voice calling down to him from above. He looked up and saw the silhouette of a head against the arching blue backdrop of the morning sky. He screwed up his eyes, smiled, and shook his head.

The man's voice came again, and Roger guessed it must be one of the waiters from the hotel. He spread his hands helplessly. "*No habla Espanol*, senor," he tried. "*Scusi. Estoy Americano.*"

The man laughed. "I was only asking what it was like down there," he said in perfect English.

Roger shrugged. "Well, it's OK. I guess," he said. "If you like sitting on rocks, that is."

"Nothing I like better. Mind if I join you?"

"Sure. Come on down."

The man stepped over the low parapet and descended, sure-footed, to the ledge. Once there, he glanced about him, selected a smoothish rock and sat down, letting his long legs dangle over the waters. He drew a deep breath and let it out in a luxurious sigh. "That's great," he murmured. "Just great."

Roger scrutinized him out of the tail of his eye. He was dark-haired, his face was tanned, and he had pale smile creases at the corners of his eyes and mouth. Roger placed him as being in his middle twenties. "Are you here for the tourney?" he asked.

"That's right."

"I thought you must be."

"How so? I speak a pretty fair Espanol, don't I?"

"Yes. I guess so. But you're not Spanish, are you?"

"No."

"Where are you from?"

"California mostly."

Roger poked his little finger up his nose and scratched around thought-

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fully for a moment. Then he glanced sideways at the newcomer, removed his finger and said, "Would you mind if I asked you a question?"

"Well, that all depends, doesn't it? I mean there are questions and questions."

"Oh, it's not personal," said Roger hastily.

"Then I'd say there's just that much less chance of my being able to answer it. But go ahead anyway."

Roger pointed across the inner harbor to where a woman in a flame-colored shawl was leaning over a fisherman on the water below her. "Do you see that woman in the red dress?" he asked.

The man followed his pointing finger. "I see her," he said.

"If I said she was wearing a *blue* dress, would I be right or wrong?"

The man glanced at him, and his brown eyes widened in fractional astonishment. "Would you mind repeating that?"

Roger did so.

"Yes, I thought that's what you said." The dark head turned and he stared again at the woman. "A *blue* dress?" he repeated. "What kind of a crazy question is that, for Godsake?"

"I don't know," Roger confessed. "But last night The Master told me that if enough people said red was blue, then it *was* blue."

The young man turned and stared at him. "Come again. *Who* said it?"

"The Master. I was talking to him out in the hotel garden after supper last night. But what I'm wondering is, if there's only *two* people and one says a thing's red and the other says its blue — well, what *is* it?"

The young man lifted his right hand and drew it slowly across his mouth. "He said red *was* blue?"

"Well, not exactly. He said it's what it is. He said it's not *really* red or blue or anything — except itself."

The young man's eyes had taken on a curiously opaque expression, and though Roger knew he was looking *at* him, he also knew he wasn't really seeing him. "I guess it's a pretty dumb sort of question," he said at last. "But, I don't know, somehow it's been bothering me."

"How's that?"

"It's just been bugging me, that's all."

"Yes, I can see that." The young man nodded. "So. What kind of an answer are you hoping for?"

"I don't know."

"What's your name, son?"

"Roger. Roger Herzheim."

"Well, Roger, I don't know that I can help. But how's this for a start? Let's say there are *things* and there are the *names* of those things. Right? Well, it's from the names we derive our *ideas* of the things. D'you follow?"

Roger nodded.

"OK. Now if we play around with the *ideas* for long enough, then, sure as hell, we'll get to believing that the ideas *are* the things. But they're not. Not

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really. The things are the things themselves. They always have been and, I guess, they always will be. It's a pretty profound truth really. At least that's what *I* think he was saying. But, hell, Roger, I could be *way* out."

Roger nodded rather doubtfully, and as he did so, his attention was caught by a sudden silver flickering far out on the eastern horizon. "Hey! Look!" he cried. "That's the first today! Just look at her *go!*"

The young man grinned broadly as he turned and gazed out to sea. "Yep, she's a real beauty," he said. "*Leviathan* class, I'd guess."

"*Leviathan?*" echoed Roger scornfully. "With five t'gallants? Why sure she's an *Aeolian*. And on the Barbados run too. Do you know that bird can *average* thirty knots?"

"Thirty knots, eh?" repeated the young man reverently. "You don't say so? Incredible!"

Half an hour later they strolled back into town to collect Roger's micomicon. As they were walking up the main street, Roger heard someone cry out: "Guilio! Where the helluv you *been*, man? I've been scouring the whole goddamn *town* for you! Tuomati's done a depth analysis of the whole Mardonian sector and he reckons he's found us some real counter chances."

"That's great, Harry," said the young man, with what seemed to Roger rather tepid enthusiasm. "Well, *ciao*, Roger. I'm really glad to have met you. I surely won't ever again mistake a *Leviathan* for an *Aeolian*."

Roger smiled and waved his hand shyly, but Guilio Romano Amato was already striding away up the hill deep in conversation with his Second.

Roger spent the afternoon beside the pool hoping that Anne would reappear. She never did. Nor did she show up in the hotel dining room for the evening meal. Roger accompanied his mother up to their bedroom and, in response to her query as to how he intended to spend his evening, told her that he thought maybe he'd look in at the Spectators' Gallery for a while.

"I'm truly flattered to hear it, honey. But isn't *Clippers* on So-Vi tonight?"

"Sure it is. But not till ten. So I thought I'd finish off my letter to dad first, then take in a bit of the tourney. You've drawn 58, haven't you?"

"That's right, pet. Board 58, Section 7. I'll give you a wave."

It was not until his mother had wafted him her ritual kiss and left the apartment that it occurred to the boy to wonder why he had not told her of either of his meetings with the two champions.

At nine o'clock he rode the elevator down to the first floor and followed the indicators to the Spectators' Gallery. The sign STANDING ROOM ONLY was up, but Roger contrived to squeeze his way in and found a place to squat down on one of the steep gang-

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ways. The general tourney had already been in session for over an hour, but The Master and his challenger had only just taken their seats on the dais, and the red light which marked The Master's sealed move was still winking on the display board. There was an almost palpable atmosphere of tension in the hall as Amato surveyed the field before him.

Roger glanced across at one of the monitor screens and saw a huge close-up of the young man's face. It could almost have been a death mask, so total was its stillness. Then the picture flicked over to the board itself and showed Amato's hand dipping into his bowl of counters. The whole vast hall had become as silent as though everyone had been buried beneath a thick, invisible blanket of snow.

Beneath Guilio's slim fingers the counter slowly turned and turned again. Red, blue; red, blue; red, blue; and then he had reached out and laid it quietly on the board. The tip of the index finger of his right hand lingered upon it for a long, thoughtful moment and then withdrew.

As the blue light sprang out on the display, there came a sound which was part whisper, part sigh, as the spectators let out their pent breath. And then, from somewhere down below out of Roger's view, in the section of the tourney which held the players of the Premier Grade, there came the shocking sound of someone clapping. In a moment it had caught hold like a brush fire, and it was at least a minute before the controller's impassioned pleas for silence could make themselves heard above the unprecedented hubbub.

"What is it?" Roger demanded, shaking the arm of the person beside him. "What's he done?"

"I don't know, son. Frankly it seems crazy to me. But I guess it must be something pretty special to earn that sort of hand from the Premiers."

Roger turned to the monitor screen for enlightenment and was treated to a close-up of The Master's face. He was smiling the sort of smile that might have wreathed the face of a conquistador as he emerged from some high Andean jungle to find himself gazing down upon El Dorado. He leant across the board and murmured something to the impassive Amato. The concealed microphones picked up his voice instantly, and around the world was relayed one single vibrant word, the supreme accolade: *"Beautiful!"*

As he was fully entitled to do under the rules, The Master requested a statutory thirty-minute recess, which the Arbitrator immediately granted. The clocks were stopped; the two contestants touched hands; and The Master rose from his cushion, beckoned to Anne, and vanished with her through the curtained exit at the back of the dais.

The microphones picked up the whisper of conversation between Amato and his Seconds. As the cam-

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eras zoomed in on them, Roger saw that the two men were gazing at Guilio with what can only be described as awe. The young man simply shook his head and shrugged as if to signify that what they were saying scarcely concerned him. He was right.

That single move of Amato's has justly earned the title of "The Immortal," though, by today's standards, one must admit that it does have a distinctly old-fashioned air. The fact is that after an interval of close on thirty years, it is all but impossible to convey just how exceptional it was at the time it was first played. To appreciate it fully, one would have to re-create the whole electric atmosphere of that tourney and the seemingly impregnable position that The Master had established for himself in the match. It has been claimed with some substance that Amato's ninety-second move in the third game of the Thirty-Third World Series marked mankind's coming of age. But probably Amato himself came closer to the truth when he remarked to a reporter at the conclusion of the match: "Hell, man, it was just a matter of realizing that you can walk backwards through a door marked PUSH."

Twelve years later, in the preface to his monumental work *One Thousand Great Games*, Guilio elaborated upon this as follows: "I realized at that moment why The Master had chosen that particular paradox from St. John of the Cross as prefix to his *Game of Games*. Up to that instant in time, my whole approach to Kalire had been based upon the overwhelming desire to win. In order to become that which I was not (in my case, at that time, the winner of that vital third game), I had to go by a way which I did not know. There was only one such way available to me. I had to desire not defeat (that seemed inevitable anyway) but the achievement of a state of mind in which winning or losing ceased to have meaning for me. In other words, I had to gain access to the viewpoint from which Kalirinos and Arimanos are perceived to be one and the same being. In the timeless moment during which I turned that counter over between my fingers, I understood the significance of The Master's casual observation which I had heard for the first time that very morning: 'There is neither red nor blue, there is only the thing itself.' The thing itself was nothing less than the pure quintessence of The Game — an eternal harmonic beauty which obeys its own code of laws and whose sublime and infinite subtlety we are fortunate to glimpse perhaps once or twice in a lifetime. Let us call it simply 'the Truth of the Game.' At that moment I recognized it, and I laid my counter where I did for no other reason than my overwhelming desire to preserve the pattern forever in my own mind's eye."

So the shapes dissolve and reassemble in the swirl of Time. Everything changes; everything remains the same.

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We know now what we are, and some of us believe we have an inkling of what we may become.

Thirty-four years have passed since Guilio Romano Amato dethroned The Master and became The Master in his turn. He held the title for seven years, lost it to Li Chang, and then regained it two years later in the epic encounter of '57. In '62 the Universal Grade of Grand Master was established, and The Game moved into its present phase.

It only remains to outline briefly the subsequent histories of those persons who have been sketched in this little memoir.

First, The Master himself. He died peacefully at his home in Pasadena three years after relinquishing his title. At the time of his death his age by calendar computation was 273 years; by physical measurement, 81 years. Despite his insistence that he wished for no ostentatious ceremonial of any kind, his funeral was marked by a full week of mourning throughout the capitals of the world, and the memorial service at the academy was attended by the ambassadors from more than two hundred nations.

Guilio Amato retired from active play in '61 and since then has devoted his energies to supervising the work of the academy, of which he had been principal since The Master's death. His best known work — apart from the *Thousand Great Games* already mentioned — is undoubtedly his variorum edition of The Master's own *Championship Games*, which in itself probably constitutes the best standard world history of Kalire.

After The Master's death Anne Henderson returned to the theater, where she enjoyed a successful career up until her second marriage in '59. She now lives in Italy with her family. Her delightful *Memories of The Master* was published in '64.

Roger Herzheim never did become a clipper captain. At the age of fifteen he sat for a scholarship to the academy and soon proved that he had an outstanding talent for The Game. At 21 he won his first major tournament, emerging a clear four points ahead of all the other contestants. By 25 he was an acknowledged Master and acted as Second to Guilio Amato in his final Championship match. He gained his own Grand Master's Robe in '67 and was unsuccessful challenger for the World Title two years later. He won the Title conclusively in '71 and has held it ever since. But his days too are surely numbered. *Sic itur ad astra.*

(This fragment of autobiography was found among the papers of the ex-World Master, Roger Herzheim, He died on March 23, 2182, aged 68 years.)

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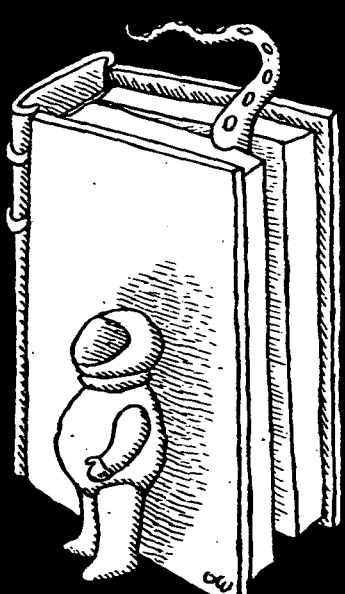
Books

ALEXEI AND CORY PANSHIN



Titan, by John Varley; Berkley-Putnam, $9.95.

The Avatar, by Poul Anderson; Berkley-Putnam, $10,95.

Sight of Proteus, by Charles Sheffield; Ace, $1.75.

The Door into Fire, by Diane Duane; Dell, $1.95.

Miracle Visitors, by Ian Watson; Ace, $1.95.

Among the other functions it serves, SF is a device for wrestling with the problem that concerns us most. Not the little nagging problems, but the major problem of relating ourselves to the universe. SF allows us to phrase our puzzlements in symbol, to write them in mythic scale, and to test possible solutions.

Modern science fiction came into being during the Great Depression of the Thirties, a time when the universe seemed to be not only alien and incomprehensible, but indifferent, even hostile. As much as Roosevelt and the New Deal, SF was concerned to present an answer to how to live, act, think and survive in such a world. The answer, arrived at in art before it was applied in life, was that a universe like that could best be coped with by a hard-boiled pragmatist armed with the facts and a .45 automatic. That answer served a generation. It explains the A-bombs we dropped on Japan to end World War II; it explains John Wayne as the model hero of the age; and it goes far to account for the nature and style of Campbellian science fiction.

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But the failure of technocratic thinking is plainly evident in Vietnam and Watergate. A bulldozer and a .45 automatic are no solution to the very different dislocations that haunt the Seventies. The ecological universe we now find ourselves inhabiting baffles and frustrates us, not because it is unyielding and indifferent, but because it is so flexible and responsive. The world has now grown so interdependent that something as minor as political turmoil in one country like Iran can shake the economics of the planet. Trying to master such a world with a table of facts and a tough-minded attitude is as inappropriate as attempting to command the tide. New and more subtle approaches are required.

In a time like this, it is appropriate to look into the mythic mirror of SF for answers. But in a new time like this one, familiar traditional old "modern science fiction" — worked up to frame answers to the questions of forty years ago — is an inadequate and inappropriate form, as out of date as John Wayne. To provide an answer to the problem of the present, SF must change. Already it is possible to see that the phrasing of the problem of discovering more sensitive modes of engagement with the universe has begun to affect the form and content of SF.

John Varley's second novel, *Titan*, is a crude, vigorous attempt to deal with present problems within the framework of science fiction. Varley is an exasperating writer to review. His novel is flimsy and awkward, like a cheap made-for-tv movie, but at the same time he is gifted with freshness of vision and a sense of the necessities of the moment. This makes him worth reading for all his limitations.

In *Titan*, a team of NASA astronauts en route to Saturn early in the next century discovers an artificial world the size of a moon — a great wheel 1300 kilometers across, like a pocket-sized version of Larry Niven's Ringworld. As the astronauts approach, giant tentacles reach out from the rim of the wheel to crack open their spaceship — the *Ringmaster*. Four women and three men awaken separately on the surface of the world within the wheel. The rest of the novel consists of their adventures in this giant playground.

Varley's people are two-dimensional. Their motivations are arbitrary and unconvincing. Although he introduces seven main characters, Varley is unable to handle more than three at a time. It is only by elimination of other characters and the sheer accumulation of detail that two of the women — the Captain, Cirocco, and her loyal sidekick, Gaby — come to take on a certain solidity.

Varley is content to build his story out of whatever old pieces come to hand. This may be something as pulp-magazinish as those giant tentacles, or as frankly derivative as all the many explicit borrowings from contempo-

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rary SF books and movies like *Ringworld* and *2001*. At times these borrowings are amusing, at other times annoying. But in one place in particular, the climax of the novel, where an evocation of *The Wizard of Oz* leaves an aftertaste of humbug in what would otherwise be a genuine confrontation with a superior being, Varley's practice seriously undercuts the effect of his work.

If Varley is attempting to find his way into the new coming world, his route is not by thinking or by imagining, but by feeling. The freshest and most compelling things in *Titan* are certain moments of essential experience: journeying wide-eyed through a permanently daylit landscape; climbing the most giant of all staircases up to heaven; snuggling in a cozy hole with your best friend while storms rage outside.

Titan is the story of a world more self-aware, more mutually supportive, more totally alive than our own. This novel indicates what sort of characters might be able to grow and thrive in such a world. *Titan* promises that the rewards of growth in a wonder world are to break out of the straitjacket of NASAness — that travesty of the science fiction dreams of our childhood — to find a new life of true adventure and purpose.

Varley's answer to the problem of the moment is to suggest that a limited lower level organism may be restructured as the result of contact with a higher being. But Varley arrives at this answer only as a special case. It is true within his pocket world, but it is not exportable back to the larger context of Earth. In order to retain their new abilities, his protagonists must defy their NASA "rescuers" and remain behind in their special world.

Poul Anderson's giant new science fiction novel, *The Avatar*, is clearly intended as a work of ambition. A raw young writer like John Varley may be careless and crude and redeem himself by being fresh. A writer like Poul Anderson, established for thirty years, runs the opposite risk of presenting us with well-polished familiarity. And for more than half the length of *The Avatar*, what we are given is Anderson-as-before, so much the same as to verge on self-parody. How well we know these story pieces: the ruggedly individualistic entrepreneur and his minstrel-mistress; the friendly alien; the repressive schemes of Earthbound bureaucrats; the battles, ah, the battles. Anderson's touch is surer now than it was twenty or twenty-five years ago...but, why bother? Only distant promise of better things and our love for the Anderson of old — when all this stuff was new — kept us reading.

Anderson's premise is that on the far side of Earth's orbit explorers have discovered a T machine — an alien device for instantaneous travel to other solar systems. From it issues a robotic voice, announcing that the machine is

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a gift from the Others, mysterious beings who love mankind but must remain unknown to them. The machine offers access to the entire galaxy. But to set out without knowing the return coordinates — and the robot provides coordinates for but one Earth-like planet — is to go forth without assurance of coming back.

What we have here, eventually, is a story like Varley's and like so many SF stories of the Thirties, a story in which a number of human individuals are abruptly thrust into an absolutely alien environment. All that they meet is strange and unprecedented. Their only resources are character and experience. The point of elemental stories like these is to discover what personal qualities and values may enable a human being to survive and grow. It is only after more than two hundred pages of macho melodrama that Anderson finally sends his protagonists on a journey Into the Unknown. Then the whole tone of the story shifts and for the first time *The Avatar* becomes something more than rote. Real purpose at last becomes clear — to continue faring in space and time, led by an unquenchable yearning for the Others and the hope of returning to Earth to offer humanity the stars.

At the same time, there is a shift in character focus. Emphasis moves from the male entrepreneur to the contrasting characters of two females — the computer-linked Joelle and the minstrel Caitlín. Joelle is arrogant, intellectually elitist, sexually arid. Caitlín is spontaneous, life-affirming, and loving. Perhaps the most moving episode in the book is an encounter with the inhabitants of a Jupiter-like planet as seen through Caitlín's eyes — a love-feast expressed in light and music.

The visioned purpose of *The Avatar*, however, remains only partly fulfilled. The Others prove able to perceive higher realities, but they themselves are not of a higher reality. Like Varley's mother alien in *Titan*, who is her world, Anderson's Others are merely god-like. They are not gods.

If *The Avatar* fails to satisfy completely, it is only in part a matter of Anderson's personal limitations. In part, it is a matter of the limitations of traditional science fiction as a form of SF. The fundamental premise of traditional science fiction is the supremacy of science; no other gods — who aren't frauds — are admitted. If there is a human hunger for true gods as basic as the hunger for food or sex—and this is what the great quest of *The Avatar* suggests—then traditional science fiction can offer us only shadows without substance. It can arouse our hunger but never satisfy it.

Sight of Proteus is a first novel by Charles Sheffield, a technically-trained writer in his thirties whose stories have recently been attracting attention in the SF magazines. Varley's *Titan* and Anderson's *The Avatar* are brave books, traditional science fiction

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novels confronting new problems and in the process becoming something other than science fiction as science fiction has been, however imperfectly. Sheffield's book invokes some of the same vision, and then turns away. *Sight of Proteus* is merely science fiction. It shows the limitations of mere science fiction in this new day.

The appearance of Sheffield's novel is of this moment: Serious issues are raised, but only in the background. *Sight of Proteus* describes an overpopulated future Earth, resources strained to the limit, a world in which social engineering is no longer sufficient to maintain stability, a world in which computer-regulated biofeedback makes it possible for anyone to alter his face and body into other form, human or non-human.

There are wild and wonderful possibilities in this premise, great occasions for drama and confrontation, but Sheffield turns his back on them. The story he tells concerns Behrooz Wolf, a member and eventually the head of the Office of Form Control, charged with repressing illegal form-changes. But Wolf himself never changes in form — not even once for kicks on a boring Sunday. He doesn't even encounter the social breakdown we are told about.

One indication of the search for more sensitive modes of engagement with the universe in the new SF is the frequent obsession with sex and with the redefinition of sexual roles. Both Varley and Anderson are able to concentrate on female characters and both their novels are filled with frantic sexual couplings. *Sight of Proteus* is most clearly old-fashioned science fiction in its masculine-minded sexlessness, like an Asimov story in the Campbell *Astounding*. Behrooz Wolf is apparently asexual. In Sheffield's novel there are no major female characters. In fact, there are no real women at all — only Marilyn Monroe clones, Pleasure Dome hostesses, and form-changers who claim to have been female once upon a time.

By the standards of traditional science fiction, as resolutely masculine and virginal as a Boy Scout camp, all the frenzied pairings and re-pairings found in the new SF must seem bewildering, inappropriate and unnecessary. The emphasis on bisexuality, or androgyny, or on intimacy with aliens must appear perverse. But in the SF stories of today, such sexual openness seems to be one of the most valuable qualities that a protagonist can carry with him when he is whisked away into the unknown. Far more valuable than a .45. And what does it mean? It may amount to an emerging faith that there is no being in the universe whom we cannot meet with trust and love.

However, instead of confrontation with change and difference, Sheffield deflects his story into triviality — intellectual problem-solving, pursuit of an enigmatic father figure, and well-rehearsed questions about scientific

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amorality. The final impression left by *Sight of Proteus* is not the protean possibility promised by the title and blurb, but rather physical and emotional stasis — encased in a static fictional form. Alone of the books reviewed here, *Sight of Proteus* concludes in bitterness and regret. If the imperative of the time is to face the unknown and embrace it, a story like this one that intimates the unknown and then retreats from it can only end in bitterness.

Whatever changes of sex and sex role are to be found in current SF, it seems to be a truism that male writers still tend to write stories framed as traditional science fiction, while the new female writers of the Seventies prefer to write fantasy. In a time when there is a separation between fact and belief, these writers prefer to believe, and let the facts go hang, rather than the reverse.

Diane Duane's alternate-world fantasy, *The Door into Fire*, is an unusually self-assured first novel. Duane has all the deftness of touch, the insight into levels of motivation, and the originality of invention that John Varley's *Titan* is missing. But perhaps her greatest virtue is that she doesn't retreat from the freedom to be mythic that fantasy offers — and that traditional science fiction is shy of. In Duane's novel there is a true Goddess who created the universe and set in train an inescapable cosmic struggle of entropy and love, but who also takes on human form for the sake of human lovers. *The Door into Fire* is pervaded by an awareness of this cosmic drama and by a sense that all the characters and events are but varying expressions of it.

In Duane's universe, there are two modes of power. One is sorcery — a cool jazzy magic, essentially static and manipulative, at its best with inert things, like our own science. Duane's description of sorcery is unique and vivid. Here, like a poetic vision of a scientist manipulating equations, spells take on form as a physical structure in the mind of a sorcerer:

> "The spells had to be built, word by cautious word, each word placed delicately on edge against another, stressed and counterstressed, pronunciations clean and careful, intentions plain.... The balance was perilous to maintain, and once or twice he almost lost it as a word shifted under another's weight. Another one turned on the word next to it — they were too much alike — and savaged it before Herewiss could remove the offender and put another, less violent, but also less effective, in its place. He had to make up for the loss of power elsewhere, at the top of the structure. He wasn't sure whether it would stand up to the strain or not, and the whole crystalline framework swayed uncertainly for a moment, chiming like frozen bells in the wind, like icy branches brittle and metallic —"

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But in addition to this sorcery, there is also Flame, the true creative ability to build and heal, possessed by only a few women and no men. Herewiss, Duane's protagonist, is the first male in many generations with the potential for Flame. *The Door into Fire* concerns Herewiss's search for the self-knowledge necessary for him to use Flame, and the Goddess through whom and for whom his quest is achieved.

However rich it may be, *The Door into Fire* is only a half-solution to the problem of the time, another compromise. Herewiss does engage with a higher level of being and is able to return to his world with necessary knowledge. But his world is not ours. It is another place, a place where our facts are set aside. That is the limitation of fantasy. Like Varley's pocket-sized fantastic world in *Titan*, Duane's universe is a special case. It works only so long as we and our problems are kept at a distance.

What is clear is that Duane is a writer to pay attention to. This first novel does display certain self-indulgences. Duane shows herself willing to settle for easy emotional effects. Her major characters are all young, good-looking, nobly-born and incredibly sexy. They are also self-centered and do exactly as they please without much concern for external obligations or the effects of their actions on others. When they are frustrated, they become petulant. If Duane can learn to see more deeply into her characters and be as ruthless with them and with herself in the promised sequels to *The Door into Fire* as is appropriate, she may well become a major SF novelist. If she continues to have things the easy way, at the least she will be an entertaining melodramatist. Perhaps her next novel will tell.

Ian Watson is a young British SF writer who never makes anything easy, either for himself or for his readers. His plots are not fast-moving or melodramatic. His characters are not particularly likeable or easy to identify with. He has little patience for elaborating upon the traditional devices of SF, either science fiction or fantasy. He gives the impression of being intent upon a particular goal in a single-minded way that tolerates nothing that does not pertain to the goal. *Miracle Visitors*, Watson's fifth novel, may be his closest approach yet to his objective.

The protagonist of *Miracle Visitors* is John Deacon, a researcher into altered states of consciousness who uses his researches as a way of tiptoeing up to the bounds of the paranormal while still keeping a safe necessary distance. However, one experiment in hypnosis gets — from his point of view — out of hand, and he is plunged into the weird realm of UFOs, Men in Black, and other anomalous creatures.

Deacon's problem is to work out the nature and purpose of these

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creatures, which can neither be taken literally as genuine aliens nor dismissed as mere hallucinations. The answer that Watson offers is that they are expressions of the planetary consciousness of Earth. They are the means by which it communicates symbolically to the individual human consciousnesses which are among its components.

Like Duane, Watson is admitting a truly higher order, not just a similitude of the divine. But not in some fantasy universe. Here and now. Like Varley, Watson presents a consciousness that is a world — but not some pseudo-mechanical construct swimming in the range of Saturn. Mother Earth.

Watson is offering a dangerous and radical conclusion — which has its basis, as Watson knows and acknowledges, in Sufic thought. If it were taken as a premise, it would form the basis of a new SF that could incorporate both traditional science fiction and fantasy. Aliens and fairies, science and sorcery are revealed as equally real, equally partial fragments of a genuine science of consciousness. Even relating to the world with ecological propriety — the highest end that our culture in general can presently acknowledge — in Watson's order becomes merely a means to the higher goal of relating appropriately to the planetary consciousness.

In *Miracle Visitors*, John Deacon eventually does make contact with ultimate reality in the form of that Void that is pure consciousness. But even Ian Watson in this story is not permanently successful in bridging the gap that exists between higher reality and everyday life. His protagonist is no longer able to exist in our world, but can only dip an occasional toe back into it as a miracle visitor himself.

This insufficiency may mean that Watson still has a distance to travel in his unique progress. It may mean that SF is only half-able to manifest its new form as yet, like a butterfly only partly metamorphosed. But *Miracle Visitors* is the boldest attempt we know of on the part of contemporary SF to confront its own nature and purpose, and alter.

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This is the last of the supernatural adventures of Willy Newbury to be published in F&SF; the stories will be collected and published in book form this fall. At the Science Fiction Writers of America annual awards dinner this spring, L. Sprague de Camp received the SFWA's highest honor, the grand master award.

A Sending of Serpents

BY

L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

I was not thinking of snakes. I was thinking of the loan that we — that is, the Harrison Trust — had made to the shaky Gliozzi Construction Company, when Malcolm McGill, our treasurer, came in.

"Willy," he said, "you know old Mrs. Dalton?"

"Sure. What about her?"

"She wants to close out her account and give everything away."

"I suppose that's her privilege. But why?"

"I think you'd better talk to her."

"Oh, lord! She'll talk my ear off," I said. "But I suppose I'd better."

McGill brought Mrs. Dalton into my office. She was one of a number of rich oldsters who had custodian accounts with us. We kept them in sound high-yield stocks and tax-free municipals, clipped their coupons, looked over their accounts a couple of times a year to see if some trading was indicated, and sent the owners their monthly checks.

I pulled out a chair for her. "Well, Mrs. Dalton," I said, "I hear you're leaving us."

She smiled sweetly. "Oh, not really *leaving* you, Mr. Newbury. Not in spirit, that is. But I've found a better use for that material stuff you call money than just sitting there in the bank."

"Yes?" I said, hoisting an eyebrow. "Tell me, please. We try to protect your interests."

"The money will be given to the Master to carry forward his great work."

"The *Master?*"

"You know. Surely you've heard of the wonderful work Mr. Bergius is doing?"

"Oh. I've heard something, but tell

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me more about it."

"The Master's organization is called Hagnophilia, meaning 'love of purity.' You see, he's the earthly representative of the Interstellar Ruling Council. They chose him for his *purity* and *vision* and took him up in a flying saucer to the planet Zikkarf, where the council meets. After they'd tested him, they decided he was *worthy* of becoming an associate member. By helping his great work, we can assure his promotion to *full* membership. That means that Earth will have a voice in interstellar affairs."

"Indeed. And what do you get out of this, Mrs. Dalton?"

"Oh, his teachings will enable us to retain our full health and vigor until the time comes for us to pass. When that time comes, we'll pass directly into our next bodies without this messy business of dying. And, he says, we'll retain the full memory of our previous life, so we can take advantage of the lessons we've learned. The way things are nowadays, we forget our previous existences, so the lessons we learned in them have to be learned all over again."

"Very interesting. How has Mr. Bergius's scheme worked?"

"It hasn't been in operation long enough to tell, really. But when old Mr. White passed, it was with such a *peaceful* smile on his face. That showed that he had gone directly to his next incarnation, just as the Master promised."

"Well, Mrs. Dalton, your Master has made some pretty big claims. Hadn't you better wait a while, to see how they pan out? He wouldn't be the first to arouse large expectations and fail to fulfill them."

Her mouth became firm. "No, Mr. Newbury, I have decided what I want to do, and that I shall do. Will you please make out the papers?"

Later, Mrs. Dalton went out of the bank with a large cardboard envelope, containing all her securities and a check for the cash balance, under her arm. Her chauffeur helped her into her car, and off they went. McGill, glumly watching, asked me:

"What's this all about, Willy?"

I told him. He said, "Hagnophilia sounds like a blood disease. What does it mean: 'lover of hags'?"

"No; 'love of purity.' Greek."

During the next month, two more of our custodian accounts were likewise terminated. My boss Esau Drexel called me into his presidential office to ask me about it.

"It would take more than the loss of a few custodian accounts to rock us, even though we're a small bank," he said, "but it sets a bad precedent. When these people are broke, we'll be blamed for letting them blow their wads on this mountebank."

"True," I said, "but the world is full of suckers. Always has been. Short of starting a rival cult, I don't see what we can do."

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"Might start one to Plutus, the god of wealth," said Drexel. "Damn it, the only way to get anything done nowadays is to start some goddamn cult. Did I tell you, my grandson's dropped out of college to join one?"

"No. What's this? I'm sorry."

"Some guy named the Reverend Sung — Chinese or something — has what he calls Scientific Sorcery, and he filled poor George's head with his nonsense. He's convinced the kid that his family are all possessed by evil spirits. So George won't have anything to do with us. If half of what George says is true, they can do things to curl your hair."

"Can't you get the law on this Reverend Sung?"

"No. We tried, but he's protected by the First Amendment. My lawyer says, if we tried force on George, we'd end up in jail for kidnapping."

Then old John Sturdevant decided to close out his account and give the funds to the Master. His account, however, was an irrevocable trust, which we could not have released even if we had wished.

Sturdevant was a nasty old man. Of few can it be truthfully said that they snarl their words, but Sturdevant snarled his.

"Young man," he said (I was pushing fifty), "I've lived long enough to know a good thing when I see it. You're standing in the way of progress and enlightenment, damn it. You're condemning me to a lingering, painful death from something or other. I've got sixteen things the matter with me now, and with the Master's help I could grow a new set of teeth, get my prostate back to normal size, and everything. Then I could pass, zip, into my next body without a hitch. Besides, with this money the Master could end war, control the population explosion, and distribute the world's wealth equitably. You're a butcher, a sadist, a Hitler. Good day, sir!"

He stamped out, banging his walking stick with each step.

The next dust-up occurred when Bascom Goetz wanted to withdraw all the money from the trust fund of his twelve-year-old nephew and ward, to enroll the boy in one of Bergius's educational institutes. These far-out schools promised to turn their pupils into superbeings who could do everything short of walking on water. The trust allowed the spending of principal for the boy's education and necessities, but we did not consider the Master's schools as coming under either head. Since Goetz had to have our consent for this withdrawal, we had a thundering row with him. He banged off to consult his lawyer.

My next contact with Hagnophilia occurred when our freshman son Stephen brought home a friend for a weekend. The friend, Chet Carpenter, wore blue jeans and had hair hanging halfway down his back — a male coif-

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fure that has always made me wince.

During dinner, Carpenter said he planned to drop out of college and devote his life to Hagnophilia. With a little prodding, he launched into a harangue about the sect:

"You see, Mr. Newbury, it's all a matter of bringing your *purusha* up to full acromatics. Your purusha is the immaterial nexus of energy-processing between the seven planes of existence. It manifests for billions of years, until its psychionic charge is exhausted. The Interstellar Council is working on a project for recharging exhausted purushas, so we won't just terminate after a mere trillion years or so.

"Well, you see, as one envelope unwinds, the purusha hovers in interspace until another issues for it to inform. But that time of hovering is out of the seven-dimensional time stream, so the memory of previous informings is laniated.

"You see, as the human population has ramped, there's gotten to be more envelopes than purushas to inform them. So the purushas of lower organisms — apes, tigers, even centipedes — have filled the vacancies. That's why so many humans act so beastly. Their purushas haven't fruited in accordance with the akashic plan but have shunted the intermediate rungs. So, you see, they're not yet qualified for human somatism.

"The Hindus and the Druids had some inkling of this, you see, but the Interstellar Council has decided it's time to put religion on a scientific basis. So they've sent the Master back to Zamarath — that's what you folks call Earth — with the true doctrine. You see, up to now the human soma, with all its limitations, has been the most etheric envelope that a purusha could inform. But with our science, we are ready for the next rung, when we can mold our envelopes as easily as you can model clay. Do you follow me?"

"I'm afraid not," I said. "To be frank, it sounds to me like gibberish."

"That's because I've given you some of the advanced doctrine without the elementary introduction. After all, a textbook on nuclear physics would sound like gibberish, too, if you didn't know any physics. I could arrange for you to take our elementary course —"

"I'm afraid I have my hands more than full. I'm supposed to lecture the Bankers' Association on the fallacy of the Keynesian theories, and I have to read up for it. But tell me: how does your cult —"

"Please, Mr. Newbury! We don't like the word 'cult.' It's a religio-scientific association and qualifies as a church for purposes of taxation. You were saying?"

"I meant to ask how your — ah — religio-scientific association gets along with the other — with the cults, such as that of the Reverend Sung."

Carpenter bounced in his chair with excitement. "He's terrible! Most of the cults, as you call them, are de-

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luded but harmless. A few even have glimpses of the truth. But Sungites are an evil, dangerous gang, conspiring against the human world.

"You see, there are a lot of abnormal purushas drifting around, which have been so distorted by the stresses of the last ten billion years that they won't fit into any envelope. So they watch for chances to inform a human soma when its own purusha isn't watching and run off with it."

"Like stealing somebody's car?" Privately, I thought that anybody so hated by the Hagnosophists could not be all bad.

"Exactly. You see, these homeless purushas are what they used to call 'demons' or 'devils.' Sung claims he can control them, but actually they control him and all his suckers. They hope sooner or later to take over Zamarath this way. The Master is going to expose this plot the next time he is translated to Zikkarf. Meanwhile, we have to watch the Sungites and try to stop their evil plans."

"Zikkarf," I repeated. "How do you spell it?"

Carpenter spelled the word. I said, "I thought that rang a bell the first time I heard it. Now I know. There was a pulp writer back in the thirties, who wrote about life on an imaginary planet of that name. He spelled it differently."

"He must have had an inkling of the truth," said Carpenter.

"What does your Master propose to do with all those poor lost souls?"

Carpenter told me of the cult's program for capturing these errant spooks and, by some sort of ghostly psychoanalysis, beating them back into normal shape. At least, that was how I understood it, albeit his explanation was couched in such cultic gobbledygook that it was hard to be sure. I said:

"Do you ever have services — I mean, general meetings, open to the public?"

"Oh, yes. We're not a secret organization in any way." Carpenter's eyes glowed with zeal. "Matter of fact, we're having one near here in a couple of weeks. The Master himself will be here. Would you like to come?"

"Yes," I said. If I was going to do anything about the racket that was siphoning off the funds of my gullible old depositors, I ought to see what the enemy looked like.

The meeting, in an auditorium a few miles from my home, was a fine piece of dramaturgy. There were candles and incense. I was made uneasy by the sight of the Master's henchmen — burly fellows in white uniforms, with their pants tucked into shiny black boots. Some assisted in seating people, while others stood at attention with grim, don't-start-anything expressions. Several at the entrances collected "free-will offerings" in baskets.

There were songs and announce-

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ments and the reading of some creed or manifesto. Then, with a flourish of trumpets, the Master appeared, white-robed, with spotlights on him.

Ludwig Bergius was a tall, spare, blond, blue-eyed man, who wore his hair down to his shoulders. The hair was so brassy that I suspected either dye or a wig. He startlingly resembled those self-portraits that Albrecht Dürer painted as pictures of Jesus Christ, which have been followed by Western religious art ever since. Bergius had a splendid voice, deep and resonant, which could easily have filled the auditorium without the public-address system.

Bergius spoke for an hour, making vast, if nebulous promises and denouncing countless enemies. He especially berated the Reverend Sung's cult by name as a Mafia of demons in human guise. His voice had a hypnotic quality, which lulled one into a kind of passive daze. One ended with the impression that one had had a wonderful revelation but without remembering much of what the Master had actually said. Some of his assertions seemed to contradict what others had told me of his doctrines; but I understood that he brought out a new doctrine every month or two, keeping his suckers too confused to think.

When Bergius had finished, his white-clad storm troopers bustled into the aisles with long-handled collection baskets to take up another offering. There were more songs, announcements, and the other routines of religious services, and the show was over. On the way out, the storm troopers were active at the exits, collecting more offerings. They were politely aggressive about it. I paid up, not being prepared to fight a whole gang of husky thugs half my age.

One of our depositors is the Temple Beth-El. The next time Rabbi Harris was in, I spoke of the Hagnophilists. With a sigh, he said:

"Yes, we've lost several members of our congregation to these ganifs. Naturally, we're stronger for religious freedom than anybody, but still — Mr. Newbury, you gave a talk last year on financial rackets, didn't you?"

"Yes, at the YMCA."

"Well, why don't you give one, with accent on these cults, at the YMHA? Turnabout's fair play."

That was how I came to give my celebrated exposé at the YMHA. I presented grim examples of elderly suckers who had blown their all on Hagnophilia, been reduced to nervous wrecks by their 'treatments,' and then had been cast into outer darkness. I ended:

"...of course, any of you is free to take up any of these forms of the higher nonsense — Homosophy, Hagnophilia, Cosmonetics, and the rest — that you like. It's still a free country. Personally, I'd rather pick up a rattlesnake with my bare hand and trust it not to bite me. Thank you."

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I had to go out of town for a few days on business. When I got back, I found a new piece of furniture in the living room. It was a small terrarium, with pebbles, moss, and a little pool. Coiled up at one end lay a garter snake.

"Denise!" I said. "What's this?"

"A boy came around with the serpent," she explained. "He said you had advertised for snakes, at a dollar a snake. Why did you do that, *mon cher?*"

"Huh? I never did. Somebody's made a mistake. What then?" I reached into the terrarium and ran a finger along the scales of the snake, which wriggled away in alarm. It had not yet gotten used to captivity. "I do like them, though."

"Priscille has always wanted a pet, ever since our old dog died. So she got this glass case from one of her friends and fixed it up."

"What do you feed it?"

"Priscille buys little goldfishes and puts them in the pond. When Dambal-lah gets hungry, he grabs them and swallows them."

"Hm. How much do these fish cost?"

"Forty cents each, at the pet shop."

"That won't do, especially when we've got a perfectly good garden full of worms."

That night, our younger daughter and I were out hunting earthworms with a flashlight. The trick, I told her, was to grab them when they had extended their front halves out of their burrows to browse on the surface. Then you shouldn't pull on them, or they would break in half. Instead, wait for them to relax and stop trying to pull back into their holes, and they would come out easily.

Priscille was not pleased with the idea of grabbing a slimy worm with her bare hands. Instead, she used paper handkerchiefs. We had caught several when a youth appeared in our driveway with a carton in his arms.

"Mr. Newbury?" he said. "I got a snake here, like you advertised for."

"Who says I advertised for a snake?" I demanded.

"Why, uh, that sign. The sign in the railroad station."

I learned that a notice had appeared on the bulletin board of the suburban station, reading: SNAKES WANTED FOR SCIENTIFIC PURPOSES. WILL PAY ONE DOLLAR FOR EACH, ANY SPECIES, followed by my name and address.

"This is a hoax," I told the youth. "I never put up such a notice, and the one snake we have is plenty."

During the next week, we were offered six garter snakes, two pine snakes, one ring-necked brown snake, and one black snake. All were declined.

I also learned that our unknown ill-wisher had planted twenty or thirty of these posters in the windows of shops in the neighborhood. I visited some of

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the shopkeepers, who were glad to remove the signs. I asked for descriptions of the prankster but got contradictory accounts. This led me to believe that several persons were involved. I asked the president of the local chamber of commerce to spread the word of this hoax and to watch for any more signs.

Next, I began receiving letters reading somewhat as follows: "Dear Mr. Newbury: I have read your ad in *Natural History Magazine* for July, in which you say you will pay for snakes. Do you want them alive or dead, and how much are you offering? Very truly yours...."

I called up the magazine. Yes, somebody had placed the advertisement in the classified section. They did not know who, but the check had been signed with my name and had not bounced. So for some time I was busy writing postcards, saying no snakes, thank you.

So far, this harassment had been a minor nuisance. We were sorrier for the people taken in by these hoaxes than for ourselves.

"I think," I told Denise, "that it must be the Hagnophilists. Somebody reported to them what I said in that YMHA speech about picking up a rattlesnake in my bare hands. They jumped to the conclusion that I have a morbid phobia or horror of snakes and are trying to drive me out of my gourd."

"My poor Willy! If they only knew that you were a secret snake-lover at heart!"

The campaign then took a nasty turn. A neighbor told me that, a month before, he had received an anonymous poison-pen letter, aimed at me. He had turned it in to the local police. Other neighbors had received them, too.

"For God's sake!" I said. "Why didn't you tell me about it then?"

He shuffled his feet. "I was too embarrassed. We know you and Denise are all right — best neighbors we have, in fact — and we didn't want to upset you. Anyway, we couldn't imagine that they really meant a sober, conventional person like you."

I located some of the others who had received the letters, but none had kept them. Some had given them to the police, while others had discarded them.

I went to the police station, where Sergeant Day dug the letters out of their file. They all read:

Dear Neighbor:

Recently my young son was outside watering the lawn, when a man jumped out of his car and attacked the boy. He seized the hose and began chopping it up with a hatchet, screaming "Snake! Snake! Damned snake! I'll teach you to send snakes to torment me!" He abused my son so that he came home terrified.

For obvious reasons, I wish to remain anonymous in dealing with this matter. No father wants his children frightened by insane per-

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sons like this one, who is probably still in the neighborhood.

I am circulating this letter in the hope that anyone who knows of somebody who has a psychotic problem about snakes will report the matter to the proper authorities, so that the victim of these delusions can be treated before he harms someone. He is described as a man in his late forties, tall and powerful, with graying hair cut short, a close-cut mustache, and driving a green foreign sports car. If you know any such person, try to convince him to turn himself into the authorities so that he can be cured of his madness.

Sergeant Day said, "We had the boys watching for this guy for weeks without results. I guess if any of 'em saw you, they just said, 'Oh, that's Mr. Newbury the banker. *He* couldn't be the one.' Some kook, of course."

"Anyway," I said, "the kook gave me a flattering description. Can you trace the author of this letter?"

Day shook his head. "The envelopes were postmarked from the center-city post office. If you've had any crank letters, you could compare the typing with that of this letter. It was typed on a manual typewriter with standard elite type. Notice that the capital *W* is battered, the lower-case *a* has lost its tail, and the *p* hits above the line. But we can't examine every typewriter in the county."

Day made me a photocopy of the letter. At home, I went through my correspondence for comparison, but no letter that I had received in the past year had been typed on the trouble-maker's machine.

While all this bothered me to some extent, it drove Denise frantic. She said:

"When we were married, Willy darling, you should have come to France to live instead of taking me to America. We French are more logical; we do not commit such *bêtises*."

The following week, the parcel service delivered a carton, securely bound with heavy staples and adhesive tape, but with several small holes punched in it. Foreseeing a struggle to get it open, Denise left that job for me when I got home. I got a screwdriver, a knife, and a pair of pliers out of the tool box, set the carton on the kitchen stepladder, and got to work. In a few minutes I lifted the top of the carton.

Up popped a mouse-colored serpentine head, and a forked tongue flicked out at me. As I stood there stupidly, movable ribs on the sides of the neck spread themselves, disclosing a cobra's hood.

I jumped back, yelling, "Denise! Get the hell out of here!"

"Why, Willy?" came Denise's voice from the next room. "Is something the matter?"

The cobra poured out of the carton

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to the floor. There seemed to be no end to it. I guessed it to be at least ten feet long. (It was twelve.) It was not even the ordinary Indian cobra, but the hamadryad, or king cobra, the biggest and meanest of all.

"Never mind!" I screamed. "Just run like hell! It's a cobra!"

The cobra reared up until the first yard of its length was vertical and lunged at me. Luckily, the cobra's lunge is slower than the strike of an American pit viper, such as a rattlesnake. I jumped back, so that its stroke fell short.

The snake then tried to crawl towards me, but the slick vinyl floor gave it no purchase. It thrashed from side to side, fluttering like a flag in the breeze but making only slight forward progress.

Backing away, I passed the broom closet. I opened the door in hope of finding a weapon. There were a broom and a mop, but their handles were too long for that limited space. Then I spotted the plumber's friend, with a stout thirty-inch wooden handle.

As the cobra, still skidding, inched towards me, I faced it, gripping the end with a rubber plunger. When the snake began again to rear up, I stepped forward and made a two-handed slash at its neck, like a golf stroke. The stick connected with a crack, hurling the cobra sideways.

The creature went into convulsions, thrashing and writhing, knotting and unknotting. I struck at the head again and again, but this was not really necessary. My first blow had broken its neck. Its skin now decorates my den.

Esau Drexel said, "Willy, we've got to do something. Someday I'll have to retire, and the Harrison Trust will need at least one man with his head screwed on right."

I said, "True enough, Esau, but what? The return address on that package was a phony. The cobra was stolen from the zoo — by a pretty brave thief, I'd say. The cops say they're up against a dead end. That private detective didn't do a thing but send in a whopping bill."

"Maybe if you gave your story to the newspapers, it would flush out the Hagnophilists."

"All that would get me would be litigation. I have nothing but an inference to connect them with this sending of serpents. My lawyer warns me that those characters are both crazy and dangerous. If anybody writes something they don't like, they sue him for ten megabucks. The suits never come to trial, but the threats and harassment keep most of their critics quiet."

"Well," said Drexel, "when all the natural means have been exhausted, we must try the unnatural ones. I told you about my grandson George and the Scientific Sorcerers, didn't I?"

"Yes. Set a thief to catch a thief, so to speak?"

"What have we got to lose?"

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"Will it cost more dough?"

"The bank will pick up the tab. We'll charge it to 'security,' which won't be any lie."

" 'Public relations' might be better. Anyway, better not let the stockholders or the Federal Reserve boys know."

"I won't. But I'll get in touch with the Reverend Sung's cult."

The Reverend Sung Li-pei, late of Taiwan, was a short, round-faced man with an air of intense sincerity. I did not assume that this air truthfully reflected the inner Sung. Having come across many con men, I have found that all of them radiated bluff honesty and sterling worth. Otherwise, how could they make their livings as crooks?

Sung began: "Mr. Newbury, you wish to have this persecution by the minions of Mr. Bergius stopped, is that light?"

"That's light — I mean right."

"That is what I said, light. Now the spell of the Red Dragon is very expensive, as its lesults are often fatal —"

"I don't want to kill the guy," I said, "just make him harmless, so he'll let me alone. Better yet, make him stop conning my depositors into giving him all their worldly goods."

Sung put his fingertips together and thought. Then he said, "In that case, the spell of the Gleen — ah — Green Dlagon would be more suitable. some of the entities I control can, I believe, lender our Mr. Bergius as harmless as a new-hatched chick, ha-ha." He gave a little forced smile.

"You won't hurt him physically?"

"No, nothing like that. You will have to attend the Sabbat. It will be held in my house this evening, beginning at eleven p.m. Now may I have your check for one thousand dollars, prease?"

"I prefer to pay in cash," I said, handing him an envelope containing ten hundreds.

He counted the bills, held them up to the light, and finally grunted satisfaction. "Good day, then, Mr. Newbury. I shall see you tonight, yes?"

Sung held out, not in some spooky, crumbling old mansion, but in a neat, prosaic modern suburban home a few miles from my own house. The lights on the front terrace were lit to show the house number. Inside, a couple of white-clad fellows in turbans, evidently Sung's servants, flitted about.

"Ah, right on time, Mr. Newbury," said the Reverend Sung, shaking hands. "Light this way, prease.... You understand that you will not be introduced to the other members of the coven. They might incur unfortunate plejudices if their scientific activity were known. Here is the dressing room. Please put your valuables in this box, lock it, and hang the key around your neck."

"Why?"

"Because you will next lemove all your clothing and leave it here. The

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box is to make sure that nothing will turn up missing, ha-ha."

"You mean, I've got to strip to the buff?"

"Yes. That is necessary for the spell."

I sighed. "Well, my wife and I have gone nuding in France, but this is the first time for me in this country."

I started to unbutton and unzip, wishing that I did not have that slight middle-aged bulge below the equator. It is nothing like Drexel's real paunch; but, despite exercise and calorie counting, I am no longer so flat in the belly as in my youth.

Sung donned a black robe. He led me, feeling very naked and a little chilly despite the summer warmth, down the cellar stairs.

The place was lit by black candles, burning with a greenish light. On the concrete floor had been drawn or painted a pentacle or magical diagram. Around this sat twelve naked men and women.

"You will take that vacant space, Mr. Newbelly," said Sung, pointing.

I lowered myself between two of the women. The concrete felt cold on my rump. I glanced at my neighbors.

The one on the left was elderly and not well-preserved; she sagged and bulged in all the wrong places. The one on my right, on the other hand, was young and well-stacked. Her face was not pretty, at least in that crepuscular light; but she more than made up for it elsewhere. She whispered:

"Hello — ah?"

"Call me Bill," I whispered back. Nobody calls me "Bill," but "Willy," short for "Wilson." Still, this seemed the best way to handle the situation. "Good evening — ah?"

"Marcella."

"Good evening, Marcella."

Somebody shushed us, and the Reverend Sung stepped into the diagram. He raised his arms and said something in Chinese; then to the circle:

"Tonight, fliends, we shall invoke the spell of the Green Dragon for our friend here, to protect him from the unjust persecution to which he has been subjected by that gang of pseudo-scientific, pseudo-magical fakers, of whose abominations we are all aware. We shall start by singing the *Li Piao Erh*. Are you ready?"

The gang went into some Chinese chant. I am told that Chinese music, like that of the bagpipes, can be enjoyed as much as that of Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, when one has been educated to it. I, alas, never have had this opportunity. So to me Chinese music still sounds like a cat fight.

The song over, Sung stepped outside the circle and said: "Now join hands, prease. You, too, Mr. Newbury."

I joined hands with those two women. There followed endless chants, invocations, and responses, some by Sung and some by the circle. It went on and on. Since most of it was in

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Chinese, it meant nothing to me.

I began to find this spate of meaningless chatter tedious. My mind wandered to my right-hand companion. Now, I am no swinger; but, still, the sight of well-turned female flesh still arouses my normal male reactions.

In fact, it aroused them in an all-too-visible way. My God, I thought, what shall I do about this? I'm sure it's not on the program. What will they do to me if they see me here with a totem pole sticking up from my lap?

By doubling up my legs, I managed to hide the offending organ. I tried mentally reciting the multiplication table. But the devil would not down.

Then something drove lustful thoughts from my head. In the center, a dim luminescence took form. It looked like a patch of luminous fog, glowing a faint, soft green. It brightened and became more substantial but did not take any definite shape.

Sung shouted in shrill Chinese. The circle repeated his phrases in unison. Sung's voice rose to a shriek. The green light faded. Sung staggered and collapsed.

A couple of sitters caught him as he fell and eased him down. Someone else flipped the light switch. The light showed thirteen naked people including myself, some sitting, some standing, and some scrambling ungracefully to their feet. They were of various ages, displaying a variety of bushes of pubic hair.

While I wondered whether to call an ambulance, Sung's voice came weakly out of the group around him: "I all light, please. Just give me minute."

Presently he got up, seeming none the worse. He said, "This incident shows that these evil cultists have strong magical defenses. Let us hope that the influences we have sent to counteract their malignant plots will not recoil upon us or upon Mr. Newbury. This is all we can do for the present. So let us adjourn upstairs."

I straggled up the stairs with the rest and joined them in the dressing room. In that crowded space, I tried to don my clothes without poking anyone in the eye.

I recovered my wallet from the lock box and followed the rest out into the living room. Sung's servants had prepared ice cream, cake, and coffee. Now the coven looked like any gathering of American suburban bourgeoisie.

They chattered among themselves. Most of their talk was about people I did not know. There were several of these covens, all apparently full of intriguing and scheming for power, just as in any corporation or governmental department.

Marcella came up, with a coffee cup in one hand and a slice of cake in the other. "Bill," she said, "wasn't it a thrill? It's my first Green Dragon. We ought to get together again, since you're such a fine, upstanding man." She giggled.

I admit that, for once in my other-

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wise happy married life, I was tempted, but only for a moment. Besides my family feelings, I have to maintain my image as a banker, sober and staid to the point of stuffiness. I am not really so stodgy (I have even been known to vote Democratic), but it's good for business. I said:

"Yess, I guess we ought, but I've got to run along. Good night, Marcella."

The next day, I tried to concentrate on my business, but my mind kept wandering to the Reverend Sung's ominous remark about his spell's recoiling back on me. Of course I did not really believe it could; but, still....

The day after that, I left the Harrison Trust at noon to drive home for lunch. I saw a crowd in the street and walked towards it, wondering if there had been an accident.

It was the Master in his white robe, strolling along and talking, while peeling bills from an enormous wad and handing them to his nearest hearers. His deep voice intoned:

"...whosoever believes in me shall not perish but shall have eternal life. For I am no longer Ludwig Bergius, but the true son of God, whose spirit has taken possession of the body of that misguided mortal Bergius. I that speak unto you am he. Labor not for the food that perishes, but for that food that gives eternal life. I am the light of the world; he that follows me shall not walk in darkness...."

The police struggled with the crowd, but the sight of money being given away was driving the people frantic. They surged and pushed. They began to shout and to claw one another to reach the Master.

A siren gave a low, tentative growl, and an ambulance nosed into the throng. Three men in white coats jumped out and, with help from the cops, pushed their way to Bergius. They took him by the arms, spoke soothingly into his ears, and led him unresisting away to the ambulance. The vehicle backed out of the crush, turned, and purred away.

Somebody tugged my sleeve. It was McGill, the treasurer. "Willy! I've been looking for you. Know what's happened? Mrs. Dalton and the rest have been coming in to reinstate their accounts. They say the Master gave them back their stuff. What do you make of it?"

"I'd have to think," I said. "Right now my mind is on lunch."

Later, Esau Drexel said, "Well, Willy, I guess your Taiwanese shaman earned his grand. No more sendings of snakes?"

"No."

"Luckily we've got a good county mental hospital. Might even cure this so-called Master."

"Do you want that?" I asked.

"Oh, I see. You think he might go back to culting." He sighed. "I don't know. We can assume that Sung is a faker like the rest. In that case, Bergius' mind just cracked under the strain of

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messiahship, so he succumbed to delusions of divinity, irrespective of Sung's spells.

"Or we can assume that Sung's treatment really worked the change in the man. In that case, was Bergius a real representative of some Interstellar Council, before the spell drove him nuts? Or was he a faker before and — and —"

"And a genuine incarnation of Jesus afterwards, you're saying?"

"Jeepers! I hadn't thought that far. Well, it's been said that, if Jesus did come again, he'd be locked up as a lunatic." Drexel gave a little shudder. "I don't like to think about it. Let's tackle something easy, like the relation between the rediscount rate and the rate of inflation."

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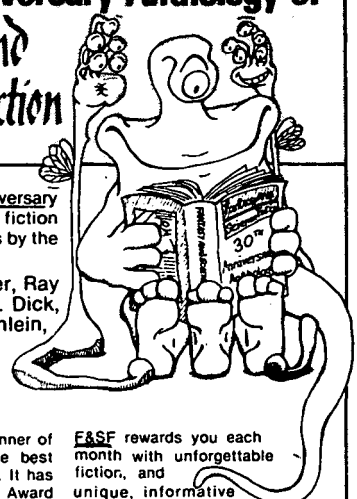

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We have three impressive first appearances in F&SF this month; this one is from a young writer with an unusual and varied background, most recently in the radio and film documentary field. The story is a fresh and pointed sf tale about the introduction of a new line of Auras, a product which is at once uncomfortably far-out and familiar.

The Whisper of Banshees

BY

NICHOLAS YERMAKOV

Penny was a raincloud. As I opened the door, I was greeted with a display of pyrotechnics the like of which meteorologists only dream about. Lightning flashed over the office desk, and she was raining all over her paperwork. I stared hard, squinting, and I was finally able to discern her features, hidden inside the swirling cumulonimbus. Her facial expression, what I could see of it, was typically blank. Unfocused. Detached.

"Uh-oh. Looks like I came on a bad day, huh?"

"The worst," said the voice inside the thunderstorm.

"Aw, c'mon now, what's a cheery girl like you have to be depressed about?"

The pattern shifted, the clouds dissolving to reveal a darkly handsome young man, superimposed upon her face. His mouth had a slightly cruel set to it, and the eyes flashed mockingly. There was a large spike embedded in his cranium.

"Man trouble? I never would have guessed. What happened?"

"The creep walked out on me," she said. "That's what I get for moving in with a guy. He leaves me, goes away on a so-called business trip and instructs the super to have me evicted. Lousy bum, now I have to find new digs. I'm fit to be tied."

"Tough luck," I said, realizing that she really couldn't see my expression of sympathy through my Beethoven projection. I always wore Beethoven when I came to see Thornton. The perpetually grim countenance annoyed him no end. He once offered to buy me a deluxe model Aura, with twenty-four functions, just to spare himself the irritation of facing Beethoven every time we met. I turned him down flat.

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"I take it the old buzzard's expecting me?" I asked. The cumulonimbus bobbed slightly in what I took to be a nod.

"Here," she said, handing me a sheaf of auto-prints on which she had been raining. They were dry immediately they left the vicinity of the downpour. I glanced through them quickly.

"Just as I expected," I said. "He's turned down the new campaign, again. You know, I'm getting sick and tired of redoing this thing time and time again. I'm beginning to wish I never heard of the Aura. There simply isn't anything *new* left to say about it. How the hell does he expect me to sell the damn thing when everybody in the world already has at least three of them?"

"Don't look for sympathy from me," said the raincloud. "I'm too busy feeling sorry for myself."

"Yes, I can see that." So can everybody else, I almost added. If it were only seventy-five years ago, when the Auras had been new! The past two months, I had spent researching the Aura's advertising history, in an effort to come up with a new angle. I could have topped those first few campaigns with my eyes closed. Even then, no one suspected that the Aura would become a way of life. Thornton's family made their millions from it and Holographics, Incorporated, had become the largest company in the largest conglomerate on the face of the earth. I was recruited at a starting salary that had made my head spin, and I was now making double that, easily. If it wasn't for the money, I would have walked out years ago. But, the money, the money....

I tucked the auto-prints under my arm and walked through to door to Thornton's office. I found myself taken aback, momentarily.

"*That's* a new one!"

"I knew you'd come as Beethoven again, you crumb. So I figured I'd top you this time. What do you think?"

Sitting behind Thornton's desk was the largest, ugliest, hairiest tarantula I had ever seen. Two of its legs rested folded on the desktop. The others were on the ground, the joints angled sharply over the creature's head. I looked for Thornton's features inside it, but to no avail.

"No diffusion?"

"Absolutely nil," the spider replied. "Terrific, isn't it?"

I could almost *feel* the hairs, they were so realistic. "Nice job, Andy. I must say, you topped me, all right. This is the new line?"

The spider shook its head. "No, this is next year's line. Still top-secret. It'll make every Aura manufactured to date obsolete. We've got a gold mine in this one! *Fifty* programable functions! *Fifty!*"

"Shit, Andy, why didn't you let me in on it? Goddamn it, I'm senior veep in advertising! I should have been in on it from the start. I didn't even know about the R&D on this one."

"Can't take any risks," the spider

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chuckled. "This is going to be a hot one."

"Well, hell, Andy, I could sell the shit out of this line! What's the idea, keeping me in the dark?"

"The idea is you've got to dump the rest of our stock before we hit full production with this one. We'll never sell the old ones once the Aura XE hits the market."

"What's the XE stand for?"

"How the hell should I know? Think of something, it sounds good, I like it. Anyway, the XE is still under wraps, as far as you're concerned. I just couldn't resist springing it on you. I knew you'd be surprised."

"Surprised? *Surprised?* Andy, I'm frantic! How do you expect me to sell the old Aura after having seen *this?* Do you have any idea what you've done to me?"

The tarrantula chuckled. Suddenly, without any dissolve, it changed. Thornton became an incandescent light bulb. "You'll think of something. I've got faith in you, kid."

"Jesus, that's incredible. No diffusion, no dissolve effect, fifty functions, what *else* does it do?"

"It's completely re-programmable. No more buying a new Aura when you get sick of the old projections. Simply take out a loaner, for a considerable rental fee, of course, and send in the XE for re-programming. At three quarters the cost of purchase. What's more, nobody else is set up to do this. We've got the jump on all of 'em. Ray-Tronics and Facade are going to be driven right out of business. We finally made it, kid. We're gonna be the only game in town."

"A monopoly?"

"I know what you're thinking, but don't worry about it. By the time the Trade Commission gets around to coming down on us, we'll have cleared double what the entire conglomerate takes in in a year. That's projected analysis. Double. At the very least. Here, watch this one...."

Thornton was showing off. Like a snap, he turned himself into a miniature nuclear holocaust. The flash, the mushroom cloud, the whole works. The Auras currently in production were positively prehistoric in comparison. And I had to dump the whole line. I began to wish I had programmed a raincloud of my own.

"I know you're not happy about my turning down your latest proposals," said the explosion, "but this is no time for second best. I don't care how many tries it takes you. I want a campaign that will sell out this year's line in no time flat. Don't worry about the XE. Obviously, it'll sell itself. This year is when I need your talents, kid. This year."

"Yeah. Sure thing."

"Before you go," he stopped me as I was turning to leave, "there's one more thing I want to straighten out."

I waited expectantly. Thornton had become himself again. Unusual, that. It must be pretty important. Nobody

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showed themselves clean anymore unless it was for identification purposes or some similar such thing.

"This is important, kid," he said. And it was then that I noticed that it wasn't really him at all. He was being sneaky about it, not telling me, but I had worked with the Aura too long and too hard not to know a projection when I saw it. Very few others would have spotted it, and even I had to think about it, but Thornton was projecting his own image over himself. His face, yet no true guide to his own expressions. I assumed he didn't know I had caught on. Interesting. The implications of this were very interesting, indeed.

"I know we've discussed this before," he said, and I realized what he was warming up to, "but this time I really mean it. You only have one Aura. I know, I checked records. And it's still the old ten-function model. Not even a fifteen, for cryin' out loud."

"Andy," I said wearily, "we've gone through this whole thing before. I told you, I don't *need* more than that. You know me, my tastes are conservative and I —"

"No, I'm sorry, kid, but that just won't wash anymore. This is important. You're senior ad veep, and you, of all people, should use as many of the new models as possible. I don't give a damn about your tastes or your style or your personal feelings or whatever. You can afford to buy a truckload of the things, even without the company discount, and I've offered you a free one several times and you've turned me down. I'm putting my foot down, kid. It's bad for the company image, you know what I mean? I've ordered thirty 'twenty-fours' delivered to your home. Our most exotic projections, barring the new XE. You will make personal appearances and you will use them all. I repeat, *all.*"

"Oh, Andy, come on —"

"It's an order, kid. Take it or walk."

Walk? "You can't be serious."

The Thornton projection was deadpan. The perfect image of the executive. Iron-grey hair, dark eyes, prominent chin, aquiline nose, bulging waistline ... it was him and, yet, it wasn't him. I was reminded of an old film I had seen, where a secret agent was summoned to see his superior, who sat at a desk in front of a window, bright lights flooding the room before him so that only his silhouette was visible. No clue to the expression on his face.

"I mean it, kid. Take it or walk. I'd hate to lose you, but I'm not going to chance getting stuck with an entire year's line just before we bring out the XE. I've got too much riding on this. I've put up with a lot from you, because you're good and I appreciate that, but your attitude's not company. You make up your mind to be a company man right now, right this instant, or you walk. It's as simple as that."

I wished I could have seen his face.

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His real face. He might have been bluffing, but there was no way to tell. I didn't relish the thought of becoming a company flunkie. I never was cut out to be a yes man. Bad enough I had to churn out all the hype for him. But the money, the money....

Mooney's was crowded, as usual. I worked my way through the bodies and elbowed my way up to the bar, forcing a niche between Jesus Christ and Lord Byron. Both were last year's models. That was the year historical characters hit big. I thought the Christ was a little much for Mooney's, but the Byron fit right in with the English pub atmosphere.

Mooney himself came over to serve me. It was an honor bestowed upon a select group of regulars.

"You'll have the usual, Al?"

Mooney was Robert Newton again. It was his favorite projection and his most effective Facade. When we first met, he had apologized profusely for wearing an Aura manufactured by the competition, but I told him it didn't bother me at all. Bad enough I had to take my work home with me every night, but I'd be damned if I'd bring my job along to my favorite watering hole.

"No, I don't think so, Mooney. I need something a little more potent this evening. Surprise me, why don'tcha?"

"Aye, and I know just what you'll be needin', too." The cockney drawl was getting to be near perfect. He almost had Newton's voice down pat. He set a tall glass down before me and leaned his elbows on the bar. "And what'll be troublin' you this fine evenin', me lad? Old Thornton put the kibosh on your campaign again, is that it?"

I sipped and almost gagged. *"God,* what is this stuff?"

"Me own special recipe," he winked at me. I could just barely make out his jowly face behind the Newton. He was studying me carefully, trying to penetrate Beethoven to see my reaction.

"This stuff is terrific, whatever the hell it is," I said. "I think I'll have another, if I survive this first round. What's it called?"

"I call it Blackbeard's Sweat. Put hair on yer chest, it will."

"Or make it all fall out, more likely. You'll kill somebody with this poison. And poison is just what I feel like taking."

"I was right then, about old man Thornton?"

"Yeah, you were right. That's the fifth campaign he's nixed this month. It's really starting to get to me. But that's only part of the problem. I can't tell you the rest of it, company stuff, you know? Suffice it to say that he dumped a real hot potato in my lap at a time when I really don't need that sort of thing. Hell, the money's great, as you know, but that fucking job is beginning to turn me into a mushroom."

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"Life is tough," he sympathized. "Why don'tcha quit, then?"

"Don't think it hasn't crossed my mind half a million times. Unfortunately, I've become too decadent. I couldn't take a cut in my lifestyle right now."

"Is it really worth it?"

"Who knows," I shrugged. I downed the remainder of the drink. "Hit me again, will you old buddy? I have a mind to get properly sloshed tonight."

Mooney began mixing a second dose and was halfway through when he paused and I saw him staring towards the door.

"Hello, then? What's this?"

I followed his gaze. Several people around us had interrupted their serious drinking to stare, also. It was not unknown for a person to be seen in public without an Aura, but it was pretty rare. A girl had walked in clean. She wasn't much to look at, short and rather dumpy. Her hair was dirty blonde and not especially well styled. She walked with a confident, defiant air about her, as if daring anyone to knock a chip off her shoulder.

"Who's she supposed to be?" I heard Mooney ask. "I've never seen that face before."

"Take another look, old buddy," I said. "She's clean."

"You don't say!" The shock resulted in the disappearance of his carefully cultivated drawl. "It's been years since I've seen anybody clean in public! What's her game, I wonder?"

"If you ask me, it looks indecent," sniffed Jesus, on my left.

"Yes, doesn't it?" added Lord Byron, a leering note in his voice. Quite a few people were staring, which is unusual for New York.

"Excuse me," I said, getting up off my bar stool. "Send my drink over when you're finished, Mooney, will you?"

I ambled over to the table she had selected, a small single by the window. She watched me as I approached.

"Hi," I said, trying to sound nonchalant. "If I'm not out of line, may I buy you a drink?"

She squinted at me, trying to penetrate Ludwig in the dark. Giving me a careful once over.

"Who's that supposed to be?" she asked, leaning back in her chair. "Not exactly the most sociable shield I've ever seen."

I pulled up a chair. "Ludwig van Beethoven. He was a famous composer."

"He must have composed an awful lot of depressing music," she observed.

"Well, that all depends on your point of view, I suppose. Personally, I find today's atmospherics pretty depressing. I prefer music to speak for itself and have a life of its own, rather than act as backdrop to epistemological mood manifestations."

The corners of her mouth turned up slightly. "You misused the word 'epistemological,' but that's all right. I see your point. Stop trying so hard. If

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you want to score, just ask me. I don't need to be impressed with pseudo-sophistication."

"Uh-huh. Well, I never was any good at being a pick-up artist. I really hate playing games."

"Then why play them?"

I shrugged. "Seems to be the thing to do."

"Like hiding behind that sourpuss Facade?"

"It's an Aura, actually. My boss would have conniptions if I wore something from the competition. I only use old Ludwig here to piss him off. This one is actually my favorite." I dissolved into Emmett Kelly.

"Goodness," she laughed, "what a role model! I don't believe you're really such a sad case. That's just another game."

"Yeah, well, you know. If you can't dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with bullshit. I guess it's just a ploy for sympathy."

She shook her head as Mooney set my drink down. She ordered for herself before I had a chance to take the initiative.

"You're really getting nowhere fast," she said. "I'll give you one more chance. What do you look like underneath the clown paint? What little I can make out through the diffusion doesn't seem half bad."

I canceled the Aura.

"Better than I expected," she said. "You're actually quite attractive. Stand up a minute."

I obliged, holding out my hands and doing a slow model's turnaround for her benefit.

"Body looks good," she mused. "I can see you work out. Okay, I'll bite. You want to do it?"

"Boy, you sure don't mess around, do you? I don't even know your name. I'm —"

"Don't tell me, I'm not interested. And stop looking so shocked. Do you want me or don't you?"

"Frankly, yes. Very much."

"That's what I like to hear. Straight from the shoulder. Come on, let's go to my place."

As we both walked out, minus our shields, I heard Jesus cluck reproachfully. "Look at that. What *is* this world coming to?"

The girl turned around and blew him a kiss.

Long legs, slightly downy with tiny hairs, bending at the knee as one rubs up and down the lower part of my body. Very short torso, almost nothing to it except soft folds of surplus flesh and generous breasts, more perfectly shaped and beautiful when free of the restraints of clothing. The skin is smooth and warm, just slightly moist with sweat. The hair is tousled, the face metamorphosed into dewy sensuality, lips barely parted, teeth shining with saliva, cheeks and forehead flushed with sunrise pink. Like the pages of an ancient book, so pressed together that they crackle when they separate, we lie

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together, hands gently searching everywhere with a tactile hunger of their own. I burrow closer under dampened sheets, trying to melt into another entity as red and blue flow into one another to achieve a soothing purple. Her fingers languorously trickle through my hair, her breath hot as her tongue laps gently at my ear. My body is suffused with an unearthly peace and calm as my emotions soar into the blissful serenity of the moment. I quiver, shaking, though there is no chill. I am transformed.

"That was ... beyond words."

She smiled and hugged me. "*That* was real."

"I *have* to know your name. *Who are you?*"

She shook her head and stroked my cheek. "It's over. Reality is brief. It's only your illusions that are lasting. Think about it and remember me."

"No, please. Don't say that, please."

"Good-by, my darling. And thank you very, very much."

I heard the whispers that night. The unearthly susurrations of a million voices, each repeating endlessly a tireless refrain. Come and find me. Seek me out. Guess who it is I really am. Understand me, take the time. I may be what I seem, but don't be too quick to judge me. Look a little deeper. Burrow down inside. See me as I really am. Penetrate the poses, look through the disguise. Find me, please find me. I don't know how to look for you.

Thornton had made good on his promise. I spent the early morning hours uncrating all my new projections. A lot. Too many. I sat down on my bed and stared at the array upon the floor. My desk, with all the plans and proposals, all the copy and the layouts, sketches, blueprints and ideas, stood six feet away. Six feet that seemed like light-years. I could not manage to traverse the distance. *This is real. This is real — is real — is real....*

I plunged down to the floor and started madly activating all the Auras. Fingers flying clumsily, clicking, setting, selecting indiscriminately, I pawed through all of them, flinging down one and picking up another, fumbling with them, dropping them and tossing them across the room in a fury of frustration, my breathing quick and labored, my body drenched in perspiration.

Chest heaving, I sat back on my haunches, my head pivoting like a bird's, surveying all the colors and the flickers and the haze. They were silent, but I could swear that I could hear them crackling. The room shimmered in the darkness as the Auras joined in concert, one image blending with another and another and another.... *Find me, look inside, come get me — get me — get me....*

I clapped my hands to my ears in a vain effort to shut out the hissing ululation. It permeated every atom of my being, striking terror like the sibilance

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of a hundred million snakes in convocation. I found that I was weeping. Removing my shoe, I began to flail away, smashing and demolishing the ghosts. My arm gave out before I could complete the job, and I sat, defeated, in the middle of the floor.

"I really hate playing games."

"Then why play them?"

"It seems to be the thing to do."

I stared into the corner at an Aura I had missed. It lay, glowing, where I had thrown it, its projection bisected by the juncture of the walls, folding in upon itself. It was one of the historical shields. I beheld the face of Abbie Hoffman, and I remembered something he had said a long, long time ago. I had planned on using it as a slogan. "There seem to be a lot of different realities going around these days." My imagination was running away with me. He seemed to be laughing.

I stepped over the zombie lying in the doorway and climbed the steep and narrow flight of stairs. With crystal clarity I saw the dirt-smeared wall with the paint flaking off it in a dozen places, the crumpled newspaper pages beneath my feet on the steps, the graffiti scrawls, the broken glass, the snot hardened on the bannister. I smelled the stale sweat and urine; I felt the damp and heard the snap of the cockroach crushed under my foot. I saw the faded outline of the number five upon the door.

There was the sound of the police lock being pulled away and, with the opening of the door, added to it was the sizzling noise of ground beef frying in the skillet. Bunny smiled and pecked me on the lips.

Her dyed blonde hair was loose and splitting at the ends. Her body, which could be seen in all its naked, skinny splendor for a drink and cover charge, was wrapped in my old bathrobe. Her feet were bare and dirty. Her eyes, so devoid of expression when first I saw them, were dancing.

"Dinner will be ready in a second. How was work?"

"Fine. I'm getting dishpan hands, I'm afraid. We'll have to get some lotion, or you'll wind up being caressed by a pair of lobster claws." I laughed and hugged her to me.

"Honey?"

"Mmmm?"

"I hope you won't be angry, but I've been saving up some money from the club, you know, and ... and we could go away somewhere. Away, I mean. Maybe to the country?"

She was looking at me, anxiously. I held her away and asked, "What brought this on?"

"Oh, I dunno. I've just been thinking, you know...."

I brushed a stray lock of blonde hair away from her face. Her hand came up to repeat the motion. "You're not at all happy here, are you?"

"Oh, no! No, darling, I'm happy wherever you are so long as you're

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with me. I still don't know what you see in me. I wake up every morning and I can't believe it. You're smart, you're really classy, you could *be* somebody —"

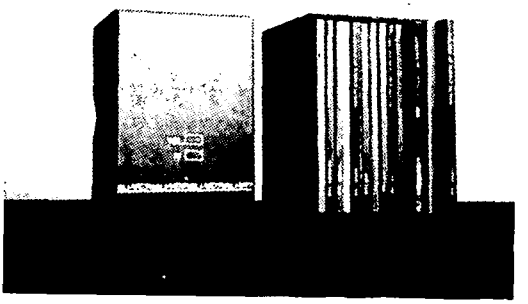
"I've already been all the somebodies I care to be."

"Oh, honey, look, I ... I don't pretend to understand why you're doing what you're doing, I don't care, just so long as you don't leave me. I love you. I love you so very much!"

"And I love you very much, too, darling. We'll go away. We'll go away very soon, baby, but not just yet. Not yet. I — I *need* this. All of this. But I don't suppose you understand."

"It doesn't matter," she said, burying her face in my shoulder. "It doesn't matter."

We stood there, holding each other, as the dinner burned. Outside, the night was filled with sounds. Screeching tires, wailing sirens, the clicking of the traffic light outside our grimy window. I could hear people shouting, dogs barking, radios playing, toilets flushing ... but no whispers. No whispers. It sure was quiet.



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F&SF regular Charles Grant returns with a vivid fantasy about a most strange love affair between a photographer and a woman of astonishing beauty. Mr. Grant's story "A Glow of Candles, A Unicorn's Eye" recently won an SFWA Nebula award as best novelet of the year.

Love-Starved

BY

CHARLES L. GRANT

You really think I'm that different, do you?

Oh, I know you meant it as a compliment, don't worry. But seeing as how we've known each other for so long now, I'll give you your due, and a warning at the same time that you won't believe a word of it. And I won't mind if you laugh, or raise an eyebrow or two. As a matter of fact, I'll be disappointed if you don't. I'm a fair man, I think, and you really should know what you're getting yourself into.

No, of course I'm not trying to break tomorrow's engagement.

But as I said: I'm a fair man.

Can't you see it in my eyes?

So. Where should I begin? With a woman, I suppose, though I hope you won't be jealous. It's all very pertinent. Believe me, it is.

What it comes down to, I think, is that I remember Alicia Chou, not because of the experience we shared, but because it was she who stopped me from even dreaming about marriage again. Or about love in the sense you would ordinarily consider it.

Unrequited passion? I hardly think so, though I've considered it, that's true. That sounds too much like a line from a grade B, 1940s film; though, if I were pressed, I would have to admit that in a grotesquely perverse way I may love her yet. Or part of me does, anyway. But that's the one thing I can't explain just now. I'm not even sure that I'll ever have the answer.

The attraction certainly wasn't her astonishing, almost exquisite beauty — I told you not to be jealous, be patient — though that too lingers, rather like an aftertaste uncommitted to being either sweet or sour. And if that sounds odd to say in this day and age, it's because she herself was a strange

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one, in a way only someone like myself can truly appreciate.

As of this moment, to be frank, I honestly cannot think of exactly what it was about her that affected me first, despite the apparent simplicity of the problem. But, then, perhaps I'm still too close to the situation after ten short years.

Tell you what. Let's turn this into a game of sorts. You order yourself another one of those pink things (none for me, thanks; perhaps later), and we'll pretend we're in one of those nineteenth-century country inns, whiling away the winter evenings scaring the hell out of each other with nonsensical ghost stories. I haven't much time, but I think I can give you a hint of what's happening — not that I expect that you'll take it. No one ever does. Which is odd, my dear, because it's not only happening to me.

If you'll remember, it was a remarkably short time before the photography studio I'd opened downtown was doing extremely well for its rather limited size. Over the first few months I'd been commissioned to shoot cover material for just about every men's and general circulation magazine going; there were even a few location trips to Europe thrown in to sweeten the lot. But when July came around, I felt myself going stale — my head was beginning to feel groggy in the same way you feel when you've just completed two or three final exams in a row. Every model was getting that same vapid, hurry-up-you-creep-these-lights-are-hot look. Every location was flat and uninviting. I dreaded going to work, dreaded even waking up in the morning. And naturally, all this eventually surfaced in the final product. I had obviously been pushing too hard, too fast, trying to make a few bucks and a name.

Finally, when the very thought of sticking my eye anywhere near a lens made me want to gag, I said the hell with it, and I left. Oh, a few clients squealed and wrung their hot little hands; a few editors growled at me over the phone; but when I told them all in the plainest, nonadvertizing language what they could do with their precious campaigns and covers, all they did was purse their lips and shake their heads and tell me I needed a vacation.

So I took one. As simple as that.

I packed a bag and fled the city without looking back. It had been some time since I'd bothered driving with the top down, and the wind cresting over the windshield felt absolutely great. Just cool enough to take the sting out of the hot sun, and strong enough to make me feel glad I still had all my hair. Everything, then, and every miserable working day was blown so far away I had to think to remember what I did for a living. Knowing me as you do, you're not going to believe this, but I was even singing out loud at the top of my voice and think-

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ing I should have practiced for the Met.

Whim chose my direction, and I paid little attention to the odometer, gladly patching a tire or two myself simply because there was no appointment I had to make by two o'clock or we'll cancel the contract and find someone else more reliable, thank you. God, but that was a magnificent feeling! On the second morning out, in fact, I'd stuffed my watch into the glove compartment and didn't put it on again for three days. It's almost supernatural, the freedom one feels when you don't turn your wrist every ten minutes to see that ten minutes have passed since the last time you looked. Incredible. And wonderful.

But then, by hook, crook, or some other heavy-handed and cliché-scarred beck of Fate's temptation, I found myself missing a few familiar comforts and ended up back in the Cape Cod I'd bought over there on Hawthorne Street, right on the river above the bend. I guess I had it in the back of my mind all along, in spite of the fact that my conscious plan was just to keep driving until I'd refueled, you should pardon the pun. I'd picked it up already furnished, but I'd never had a chance to really enjoy the overstuffed chairs and the dusty bookcases, the stereo, the TV, and God knew what else; I'd seldom stayed there more than just to sleep, and sometimes not that, if you know what I mean. But now ... Lord, I could roam through the cool and quiet, let that old place soak out of my system everything the drive in the country hadn't banished. I turned myself into the absolute sloth, and I loved it, every minute, even fell in love with the shadows in the house.

And though I wasn't used to taking things easy, I had no problem at all falling into the slow, casual tempo of summer neighborhood life. Early evening walks really *seeing* the place where I'd chosen to live, scuffing leaves in the park and listening to bandstand music after a leisurely cooked dinner, once even stringing a hammock between two trees in the yard and humming in time to the river that marked the end of my lot.

It was ... beautiful, because, for I don't know how many champagne days, I was actually seeing things through my own eyes instead of a camera's, and I was totally convinced I couldn't have been happier.

Then, one afternoon, I was baking in a sauce of suntan oil on a small section of riverbank set aside as a beach. I spent a lot of good time watching the kids splashing around, dunking each other and really getting frustrated learning to swim in the river's moderate currents. For a while there I really got involved rooting for one little guy who was experimenting holding his breath and trying not to drown at the same time. I was timing him by counting thousands and making bets with myself, when this indescribable pair of legs blocked my view.

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Now I know that some men are devotees of the decolletage, and others are — as one of my girls once put it — admirers of ass; but I prefer those anatomical delights that carry the rest of the woman around. It has always been my solemn creed that bust or buttock, nose or navel, aren't anything at all without a fine pair of legs to support them. Not that this woman didn't have the appropriate accessories, mind you ... but Lord, those legs! All the Troys in history would have gladly fallen for them, would have definitely been singed by the rest of her. Curiously, she was wearing a one-piece bathing suit that would have aroused attention on any beach simply because it was so out of place it was quaint. Black, too, her hair, curled inward slightly at the ends and cut to a point between her shoulders.

I lay there quietly, waiting for her to turn around, and paradoxically hoping that she would stay facing the water.

But she turned, abruptly, and looked straight into my eyes.

(As I do now, so I can see you're not jealous.)

Disconcerted though I was, her stare wasn't at all unfriendly. She was Eurasian: so temptingly French (perhaps), so tantalizingly Oriental (perhaps), that a dozen years' concentration couldn't have discovered where one began and the other left off.

When I sat up, she knelt directly in front of me and smiled, her deep tan looking darker in the shadow of her lips. I felt a bit fuzzy, as if I'd had too much sun and beer, but I managed a weak grin in return. Obviously, I wasn't at the top of my form.

"I'm sorry," I said, thinking all the while how brilliant that sounded and how stupidly seventeenish I was feeling.

"For what?" She laughed clear into eyes perfectly framed by black bangs.

"You got me. For staring at you, I guess. It's not exactly the most polite form of introduction."

She laughed again, tossing her head from side to side, and damned if I didn't feel shocked — at myself. Right at that moment I wanted to rape that animal — there's no other word — kneeling so primly not a hand's breadth from my feet. I know you know me well enough to understand that I'm not one to get upset over an occasional erotic impulse; but the sheer force of that woman had to be felt to be believed.

And while I was smothering in this sense-overload trance, she covered her mouth with silver-painted nails and swung around on her heels until she was resting on the grass beside me. Which is how we spent the rest of the afternoon. Seduction without words.

Except ... most of the time I tried to stay just a few inches behind her. To avoid her eyes.

Alicia Chou. Eyes brown-black, with a single gold fleck in each, just off-center.

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And when I finally introduced myself, she said, "Carroll is an odd name for a man, isn't it?" Her voice was less a purr than a growl lurking beneath thin velvet. "Your father must have been a very handsome man."

The touch of her hand on my knee, thigh, shoulder — the gentle way she brushed my back was colder than the lotion she rubbed absently into my skin.

Cobra and mouse.

Once, she kissed the back of my neck, and I nearly grabbed a mirror from a passing woman to see if I'd been branded.

Everyone smiled at us. The adults at me, the children at her. What a handsome couple, I knew they were thinking.

It was only natural, then, that I asked her to dinner.

She wouldn't tell me where she was staying — a wise precaution for a woman alone — but promised to meet me at my place at seven. We parted and I ran — you're laughing, but I did — I ran home and stood in front of the bedroom mirror, thinking that all that had happened was far too good to be even remotely true. I scowled at my reflection: too much hair for a smallish head, eyes too blue, nose too long and too sharp, ears too close to my head. No leading man, that was for certain, and thus no physical reason why Alicia should clasp me so suddenly to her not insubstantial bosom. I laughed aloud. By God, Carroll, I said to myself, you've been picked up! You've actually been picked up. By a raving nymphomaniac, a psychotic murderess ... I couldn't have cared less. She was elegantly available and I was on vacation.

What I hadn't planned on, of course, was falling in love.

And that is the wrong place to laugh, my dear. It was marvelous, right out of Hollywood, magnificent ... and terrifying.

If I'd listened to myself then, I wouldn't be telling you this now.

So she came, and we drove to a riverbank restaurant in a hotel in the next town. Dined and danced and stood on the balcony that faced the water. I kissed her cheek, felt giddy with the wine, kissed her lips ... and when it was over I was drained, so drained that I had to lean against the marble railing to keep from collapsing.

For one second, hardly worth mentioning then, I hated her.

Then it was over and we headed back to my home. There had been no innuendo conversation. The slight turn of her mouth, the graceful flow of her hands spoke for her. She never asked about my job, family, income or tailor. I myself had been too stunned by what I'd thought was instant love to mumble even a hello and you look wonderful and why don't we dance.

I never felt the pain that lanced my will.

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Neither do I remember the drive back to the house, the opening of the door, the walk upstairs. I couldn't help but feel as if the world had wound down to slow motion, so languid her movements, so careful the display of her smile and her charm.

She sat on the edge of the bed and gestured toward the chair I kept by the nightstand. "Drink?"

Why not, I thought. Get bombed, Carroll, and let's get on with whoever is raping who.

"Of course," I said, mixed what she asked and finally, at last, she let me sit down.

We toasted each other, and I loved her again.

Then her gaze narrowed over the top of the champagne glass, and I realized with a start how I had spent most of the afternoon avoiding those eyes, all the evening losing myself in them. But when, as an experiment in masculine control, I tried to break away, I couldn't. And my palms became unaccountably moist.

"Carroll is a strange name," she said.

"You've already said that once, Alicia," I said, grinning stupidly. "It was my dear departed mother's idea, not knowing what she would have at the time and not feeling like coming up with two sets for the sexes."

"I love you, strange name," she whispered. Not a word out of place, not a change in tone. Something broke briefly through the sparkling cloud I felt over me, but I couldn't put a name to it and so shrugged it away.

Instead, I emptied the glass and set it on the floor beside me. Cleared my throat and said, "This is going to sound ... well, it's going to sound ridiculous, under the circumstances, Alicia — but, damnit, I think I love you, too." It was all so bloody serious, so intolerably solemn that I wanted to laugh. But I couldn't; I was too nervous. Not of breaking the spell that nights and champagne and mysterious women weave, but of her and those eyes with their single flecks of gold.

"For how long, strange name?"

"Shouldn't that be obvious? Forever. How else?"

It was she who laughed then. Deeply. In her throat. And as she did, I became inexplicably angry. Didn't she know, I demanded of myself, that in thirty-four goddamned years on this road I had said that only once before when I'd meant it — to a cheerleader in high school. Who had also laughed, but loudly and shrilly, with her head thrown back and her eyes rolled heavenward in total disbelief.

"Strange name, love me," Alicia said.

I hesitated. I stalled. Her request became a demand.

And I did, and am now regrettably forced to resort to the old purple-prose lines of jungle passions and animal ferocity. But that, I'm afraid, is exactly the way it was. Stripped, perspiring even before we began, stalking each

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other without benefit of cinematic loveplay, manual directions of foreplay and stimulation. Sheets and blankets were literally torn, glasses were shattered, bottles smashed ... again and again and again ... and again.

"Love me," she hissed.

And I did. Bleeding, drawing blood, bruised and bruising ... again and again.

"More," she crooned.

I did. God, I did.

Dawn, and I did not see it. Dusk, and I could not see it. Crying, laughing — a haze of cigarette smoke, a waste basket gushing uneaten meals one of us made downstairs in the kitchen.

It must have been her. I couldn't have moved.

We stood by the window in caftan robes and watched the river pass a beautifully bright day beneath us, beneath the willows. It was peaceful and wonderful; I held her gently against my chest and told her so, whispering in her ear all the idiot lovephrases that men think original when the loving is done.

"Then love me," she whispered back.

The radio played Brahms and Vaughn Williams. Nothing louder for this room, on this day, at this time.

"Love me," she sang.

I told her how, when I was in college up there in Hartford, I had exhausted myself during one summer vacation visiting ten European cities in less than sixteen days. I must have been drunk when I said it, I don't remember now, but I suddenly turned mawkish and sentimental, muttering "Those were the good old days" over and over again and praising their lack of tears and responsibility and extolling my love for them in dreams and bursts of unbidden nostalgia. I told her about an Irish setter I once had, how he could never go with us on vacation because he always got carsick and had to stay at the vet's. About the cheerleader. About the models. About the slices of my soul that went into my work.

"Love me," she comforted.

Everything is relative, said the speeding turtle to the snail. There must have been Time someplace, but two days were gone before I first began to think that I was losing my mind.

Alicia was sleeping at my side, peacefully, evenly. My mouth was burlap, my head cement, and, God, dear God, how everything ached! For one nauseating moment I thought of a morning a couple years back when I'd eaten tainted food in a Boston fast-food joint and they used a fool stomach pump while I was still semi-conscious. I groaned and pushed myself up on my elbows, looking for a mirror to see if in fact I was really turning into an airless balloon; but a pain I knew instantly was frighteningly abnormal flattened me like a hammer, and I had to gasp for a breath. Beyond that, however, I felt ... nothing. I registered the room and what I could see through

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the window, but there was nothing left inside me to hang the pictures on.

That, I think, is when the terror began. As if I were suffering a malaria attack, I simultaneously grew cold and soaked the sheets with a bath of perspiration that made me tremble. And I grew still more terrified when I tried to cry out with that slow-growing pain, and my mind said there was no reason, and my mouth made no sound.

I fell asleep then, unwillingly, and I dreamt as I do now — in blacks and greys and splashes of sterile white. And once, in that dream, I heard someone mention food, and I heaved dryly for ten minutes before I could fall asleep again.

The last thing I recall seeing was a floating, broken camera.

I woke once more. I think it was daylight. I really don't know because Alicia was bending over me, her lips parted and smiling.

"Can you love me, strange name?" she asked, carelessly tracing a meaningless pattern from my chest to my stomach to my groin and back.

"My God, Alicia!"

"Can you love?" she insisted.

"My God, no!"

She pouted through a smile that told me she knew better.

"Alicia, please."

"You don't love me anymore."

A fleeting array of artfully shadowed images: of Alicia in her gown, the swimsuit, the robe, her nakedness atavistic in the arousal it produced, all made me smile lazily until I turned my head ... and saw the look in her eyes.

And in that final moment before she smiled again, I knew at last what I'd been trying to avoid: Alicia was still hungry, and she kissed me, hard, before I finally passed out.

So then. Before you tell me what you think, my dear, let me tell you what I think you've already decided. Let's see: maybe I'm simply crazy, right? Ah, too easy. Perhaps then it's a fantasy, cleverly manipulated to hide a disastrous affaire. Or, better yet, perhaps I had become so drunk at dinner that I was physically incapable of playing the Don Juan in anything more than high-sounding words, thus striking myself low with assorted simple trauma.

I was right, wasn't I.

Well, it all sounds very intelligent, I admit; all very up-to-date and properly sophisticated. In fact, if I didn't have to hurry along right now, you might even have convinced me, given enough time.

But I really must run, as I warned you at the start. And, for heaven's sakes, stop worrying about my health. I'll promise you now, if you like, that I'll dine without fail later this evening.

Ah, my darling, you *are* jealous, aren't you?

But you know me, first things first; so please don't worry, I won't forget.

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You see, there's this wonderfully attractive brunette named Claire who's dying to see the river from my bedroom. Look, why don't you have another drink on me, and I'll see you tomorrow. I've worked up a marvelous appetite talking with you, and Claire is waiting for me right this moment.

I think you'd like her. She's a wonderful girl. A great girl. She thinks the gold in my eyes is sexy.

She loves me. She really does.

But just so you'll know that I will keep my promise, lean over here and I'll give you a kiss.

One kiss.

That's all.

One kiss.

I'm hungry.

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Films

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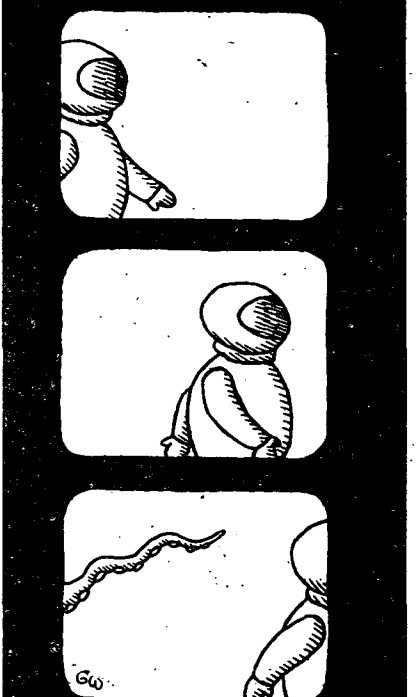

The Lion, The Witch, and Buck Rogers

I don't seem able to say often enough that science fiction film and science fiction literature have to be judged differently. In the baldest possible terms, i.e. economic, it takes a relatively few readers to buy enough copies of a book to pay for its publication; the number of viewers needed to justify the making of a film is comparatively astronomical. It is a mass medium, and with rare exceptions, an s/f film has to be common enough coin conceptually to interest the mass.

Therefore science fiction in the film is usually about 20 years behind science fiction in print; it seems to take about that long for the ideas that the field uses to percolate down.

As of late, we seemed to have been going backwards. The general idea of a science fiction movie now is *Star Wars;* there is no other variety (notice how little noticed or publicized *Quintet* was as *science fiction).* And *Star Wars* is epitomally 1930s, Hamiltonian s/f. (That's Edmond, not Alexander.)

So now we're about 40 years behind. As much as I loved *Star Wars,* I consider this unfortunate, because until a new trail blazer comes along, almost all s/f film is going to be molded in the image of Lukas's baby.

Under the circumstances, it was inevitable that there be a remake of the exploits of one Anthony Rogers. Who?

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Well, to be less formal, the new film is called *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*.

The original Buck Rogers novel went by the name of *Armageddon 2419 A.D.* was published in *Amazing Stories* in 1928, and is still amusing reading. Buck Rogers, a nice all-American boy of the period, has his animation accidentally suspended and wakes up in 2419 A.D. America is a conquered country and has reverted to semi-barbarism. Small groups wage guerilla war on the conquerers, who are savage war lords with a vaguely Mongolian origin and mucho super science, most of which they have stolen from us.

Buck falls in with one of these guerilla groups, and the action of the novel concerns his leading them to victory over the Yellow Peril. (*Armageddon 2419 A.D.* is currently in print in paperback; its author is Philip Francis Nowlan.)

The novel would have probably fallen into the flaking yellow oblivion of old pulp pages of it hadn't been chosen to be the basis for a nationally syndicated comic strip. For reasons that escape me, it caught on and the rest is history, including the now camp classic movie serial starring Buster Crabbe, which stuck pretty close to the original material.

The new version, on the other hand, diverges widely. Buck is now an astronaut (will I never get over wanting to spell that astro*naught*?), but still all-American as all Hell. He runs into a sort of outer-space freeze-drying effect, and he and his ship float about out there for five centuries.

He is eventually picked up by a peaceful trade commission from the planet (?) Draco, travelling to Earth in a ship about the size of Madagascar and run by a bee-yoo-tiful Princess. Neither she or the Draconian mission turn out to be at all peaceful; Buck is sent ahead as an unwitting spy, and the rest of the movie is spent by him: (1) convincing the current inhabitants of Earth that he is not a spy but really all-American, and (2) foiling the neferious plans of the Princess & Co.

All this is as simple-minded as it sounds, and pretty near as much fun as it should be. The special effects — the inevitable space battles, blowing up of Madagascar, etc. — are not quite up to *Star Wars'* level, but close enough. The humor is sophomoric, and we are given, of course, a darling little robot Laurel whose Hardy companion this time is a sentient computer that lives in an oversized pendant worn by the robot.

The film gets high marks on two counts. First the design: the sets are very handsome and the futuristic Earth city is a knockout. Costuming is also excellent: the Terran space-suit uniforms have more than a hint of the sleek beauty of Virgil Finlay drawings, and the Princess's get-ups are hysterically outrageous and calculated to raise the blood pressure of every all-American boy around.

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The other advantage *Buck Rogers* has is, of all things, its Buck Rogers, Gil Gerard. It had seemed that the current s/f film hero was destined to be endless Shaun Cassidy clones like that terrible twosome on *Battlestar Whatsit*. Gerard is more mature, for one thing (was that a hint of gray I saw in his hair or just left-over permafrost?). He does everything an s/f hero is supposed to, plus extras such as dancing a mean Disco. And he exudes charm like no film actor I've seen since Cary Grant. For once, the two ladies (the other being the Princess's rival, dear old Wilma Deering) were thoroughly upstaged.

So all in all and despite my cynical opening words, I'm glad this one was made. I'm just not sure how many more in the pattern the genre can stand.

C.S. Lewis's classic children's fantasy, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, the first volume of the Narnia series, was produced in animated form and shown in two hour-length segments on television. There was a problem to begin with; Lewis started the series at a very low level. The other six Narnia books are a quantum leap in sophistication and I, for one, accept *Wardrobe* with a certain amount of tolerance as only an entree to Narnia.

Its intrinsic cuteness was of course exploited in the film version to a degree. I will say that the material was generally treated with respect; there were no blatant departures from the book nor did anyone, thank Aslan, break into song at any point.

But the visual style and the vocal performances were, at best, undistinguished, and what appeared on screen was dull, dull, dull. I shouldn't think too many people are going to find their way to Narnia this way.

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George Zebrowski's last story here was "Heathen God," a Nebula finalist for 1971. His major novel MACROLIFE has recently been published by Harper & Row.

The Word Sweep

BY

GEORGE ZEBROWSKI

The words on the floor were as thick as leaves when Felix came into the party. At five past eleven, the room should have been silent.

"Quiet!" he shouted, unable to hold back.

The word formed in the air and floated to the floor at his feet. A deaf couple in the corner continued talking with their hands. Everyone was looking at him, and he felt his stomach tighten. He should have motioned for silence instead of speaking.

A small woman with large brown eyes came up to him and handed him a drink. He sipped. Vodka. It was her way of saying, yeah, we know you've got a lousy job policing the yak ration. Pooping parties for a living can't be fun, you poor bastard. We know.

Heads nodded to show approval of the woman's gesture.

Felix tried to smile, feeling ashamed for losing control. Then he turned and went out again into the cool October night.

At the end of the block, the compactor was waiting for the sweeps to clean out the corner house. He was glad that he did not have to work in the inner city, where control was always slipping, where the babbling often buried entire neighborhoods to a depth of four or five feet.

He took a deep breath. Watching out for five suburban blocks was not so bad, especially when his beat was changed once a month, so he could not grow too friendly with the homeowners.

The tension in his gut lessened. At least this party had not given him any trouble. He could see that the guests had tried to be sedate, speaking as little as possible during the evening, priding themselves on their ability to hold

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words and liquor. He had not seen any babblers sitting on a pile of verbiage. This was a good block, much better than last month's section.

A dog ran by in the empty street. Felix noted the muzzle. No problem there.

He started a slow walk home, passing the compactor as it turned on its light and started silently down the next block. Two streets down, he turned to avoid going through the district square, where they were still cleaning up after the political rally.

There was a message for him on the phone screen:

> Let's ration together after you get home. I'll save mine. Love, June

The words angered him, bringing back the tension in his stomach. He cleared the screen, resenting the message because it had ruined the calming effect of his long walk home.

He went into the bedroom and lay down. When he tried, he could almost remember the time when words did not materialize. He must have been four or five when it happened for the first time. He remembered wafer-thin objects, letters joined together in as many differing styles as there were speakers.

At first it had been a novelty, then a perpetual snowstorm. Cities had to clean up after a daily disaster, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, trucking the words to incinerators and landfills. The words would burn only at high temperatures, and even then they would give off a toxic gas which had to be contained. There had been a project to find a use for the gas, but it took too much energy for the burning to make it worthwhile; later the gas was found to be useless.

Psychiatric treatment came to a halt, then shifted to computer printout and nonverbal therapies. Movies had gone back to silent and subtitled versions; only the very rich could afford to truck away the refuse after each talkie showing. Opera was performed in mime and music-only reductions....

Felix opened his eyes and sat up in the darkness. Somewhere far away, a deviant was running through the streets. He could just barely hear the screaming, but it was loud enough to remind him of the time he had been a deviant.

Unable to control himself, he had almost buried himself in words one night, under a giant elm tree near the edge of town. The words had poured out of him as if they were trying to outnumber the stars, while he had held his stomach and screamed obscenities.

Bruno Black, who had been fully grown before the world had changed, had explained it to him later. It had been the silence, the prolonged, thought-filled silence, that had broken his control, as it had broken the resolve of countless others. The need to speak uncontrollably had come into him one day, ridding him of cogency, sweeping through him like a wind, be-

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stowing the freedom of babble, taking away wit and limit, making his mouth into a river, out of which words had flowed like wars ... in the end a wonderful nonsense had cleansed his brain.

Now, as he listened to the distant deviant howling in the night, he again felt the trial of terse expression; the jungle was growing in around him, threatening to wipe away all his control when he fell asleep, enticing him with pleasures stronger than the silence....

He looked around the dark room. The closed bedroom door stood in the corner, a sly construction, suggesting an entire world on the other side....

The distant sound stopped. They had caught him. Samson, Winkle, Blake — all the block watchers had converged on the explosion to squash it. The word sweeps were already clearing up, compacting, driving away to the landfills.

For a moment he wondered if it might have been Bruno, then rejected the idea; Bruno's voice was much lower than that. It might have been a woman.

Felix relaxed and lay back again.

He woke up in the night, got up and went to his desk. He saw the phone screen glowing and remembered June's message. The new message read:

> You bastard! Answer for Christ's sake. Is Bruno with you again? What do you two do together?

He cleared the screen and turned on the desk lamp. Then he sat down and took out Bruno's journal. He looked at it under the light, remembering how much relief it had given him through the years. His fingers were shaking. Inside its pages were all the things he had wanted to say, but Bruno had written them down.

Opening at random, he looked at the neat handwriting. Bruno was not verbose, even on paper, where it would have been harmless. The very letters were well-formed, the sentences thoughtful and clear. If read out loud, they would not exceed anyone's daily ration.

He read an early entry:

> 23 July 1941
>
> When the words started materializing, the difference between language and physical reality was blurred. The appearance of spoken words in all shapes and sizes, depending on the articulation of the speaker, imposed a martial law of silence, enforced at first by a quietly administered death penalty in some parts of the world. The rate of materialization had to be cut down at all costs, lest the world be thrown into a global economic depression....

The depression had come and gone, leaving behind a new code of conduct, the word sweeps, the compactors, and the block watchers — and a mystery as great as the very fact of existence.

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Bruno was certain that there had to be an answer; his journal represented twenty years of speculation about the problem. The possibility of an answer, Felix thought, is all that keeps me together. I don't know what I'll do if Bruno doesn't come back.

Someone started pounding on the front door. Felix got up and went out to check.

He opened the door and June came in, marching past him into the living room, where she turned on the lights.

He closed the door and faced her.

"You treat me like I don't exist!" she shouted.

The *you* was a flimsy thing; it broke into letters when it hit the carpet. *Treat* seemed to be linked like a chain as it clattered onto the coffee table, where it produced a few nonsense-masses before it lay still. *Me* whipped by him like a sparrow and crunched against the wall, creating more nonsense-masses. *Like* settled slowly to the rug; *I* knifed into the pile next to it. *Don't* and *exist* collided in midair, scattering their letters.

Felix spread his hands, afraid to speak, fearful that at any moment his deviancy would slide up out of the darkness within him and take him over. Didn't she know how hard a life he led? He'd told her a hundred times. A look of pity started to form on her freckled face, reminding him of the brown-eyed woman who had given him a drink; but it died suddenly. June turned and started for the door.

"We're finished!" she shouted as she went out. The words failed to clear the door, as she slammed it behind her, dropped next to the coat rack. He looked at the nonsense-masses that her pounding had created, grateful that the door was well-cushioned.

He let out a mental sigh and sat down in the armchair by the lamp. At least there would be no more pressure, however much he missed her. Soon, he knew, he would have to go looking for Bruno.

The clock over the fireplace read four a.m.

He turned on the radio and listened to the merciful music. The notes formed, evaporating one by one. A harpsichord came on, the notes lasting a bit longer before winking out. He watched them come and go for a long time, wondering, as Bruno had done so often in his journal, what kind of cosmic justice had permitted music to remain. As the Scarlatti sonata rushed toward its finale, the notes came faster and faster, dusting the room with harpsichord notes....

June had never liked Bruno; there was no darkness in her. Like those who were forgetting the self-awareness created by speech, she did not need to speak.

He turned off the radio and wondered if Mr. Seligman next door was burying himself in sleeptalk. How many children were sleeping with their training muzzles on, until they learned self-control?

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His hands started shaking again. The pressure to speak was building up inside him, almost as strongly as during his deviant days. June's visit had triggered it; the loss of her had affected him more than he realized.

"June," he said softly, wanting her.

The word was round, the letters connected with flowing curves, as it drifted to the rug. He reached down, picked it up and dropped it into the felt-lined waste basket.

His hands were still shaking. He got up and paced back and forth. After a few minutes he noticed that his screen was on in the bedroom. He walked through the open door, sat down at the desk, and read:

> Disturbance reported at the landfill. Check when your shift begins this morning. Webber

One of the others has gone nuts, he thought, and they want me to bring him home.

Felix changed his shirt and shoes and went outside. He unlocked the bicycle from its post, mounted the cracked leather seat, and pushed out into the empty street.

Cool, humid mists rose around the one-story suburban houses. Only every fifth streetlamp was on, and these began to wink out as the sky grew brighter. He estimated that it would take him half an hour to reach the landfill.

He remembered it as a plain of dry earth being blown into dust clouds by the wind. The place would soon be incapable of accepting any more words, or garbage; it was full, except for an occasional hole. A new site would have to be found.

As Felix neared the landfill, he noticed the strangeness of the grass on both sides of the road. The sun cleared the horizon in a clear blue sky; and the grass suddenly looked like matted animal hair, growing up from a red skin. There was a pungent, lemon-like odor in the air as he stood up on the bicycle to climb a hill.

He reached the top and stopped.

The landfill was covered with trees, looking like fresh moss, or tall broccoli. The sharp smell was stronger.

He got back on the seat and rolled downhill.

A stillness enveloped him when he reached bottom, as if he had entered the quiet center of the world. As the forest came closer, he considered the possibility of a massive planting program but realized that it would not have been possible in so short a time.

He passed the first trees. They appeared very fresh, like the limbs of young girls, bent upward, open in inviting positions; soft yellow-green moss had grown between the branches.

He pedaled forward, growing anxious, but the stillness was restful, calming him. The lemon-like scent of the trees cleared away the sleepiness in his head.

Suddenly he rolled into a small

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clearing and stopped short at the edge of a large hole. Bruno Black sat at the bottom, talking to himself as the words piled up around him.

"Hello, Bruno." The words formed and slid down the sandy slope.

The blond-haired man looked up. "Come down." The words popped away from his mouth and landed on the pile.

Felix started down.

"It's safe here," Bruno shouted, "we can talk all we want."

When he reached the large, seated figure, Felix noticed that Bruno's clothes were torn and dirty.

"You've got to let me get you out of this," Felix said.

Only the first three words formed, falling at his feet.

"Notice that?"

"What's going on here, Bruno?"

No words formed this time, as if the effect was beginning to die away.

"It's only here," Bruno said, "nowhere else."

Felix sat down next to the ruddy-faced man and looked at him carefully.

"Bruno — you know me?"

"Of course, Felix, don't be stupid. You're my friend."

"What are you doing here?"

"I think I've figured it — all of it, why it happens, and why it fails here." The last three words formed, wretched little gray letters floating in the air like smoke.

Bruno brushed them away with a bear-like swipe.

"Felix, I may really know. I'm not nuts."

Felix heard a wind rushing above the hole, as if something were growing angry. He remembered a schoolyard, many years ago, with children playing volleyball, silently.

"Have you got a shovel?"

"No," Felix said, "but I can get one."

Again no words. Bruno was watching him.

"Wonderful, isn't it?"

"Bruno — how long has all this been here?"

"About a month."

"All this grew in a month?"

"The trees grew out of the buried words, Felix, pregnant words they were...."

The silence was clear between them, devoid of words.

"It comes and goes," Bruno said. All the words appeared, letters deformed, as if they were gnarly tree branches, and fell into Bruno's lap.

"There's something that does this," he said as he brushed them away. "We can bring it all to an end, when we find it. The shovel is the key to the whole business."

It all made a peculiar sense.

"There's a utility shed at the fork in the road," Felix said, "but are you okay?"

"I just look bad."

There were no words. Felix marveled as he scrambled out of the hole. Bruno was definitely on to something.

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* * *

Bruno was digging with his hands when Felix came back with two shovels. He threw them in and clambered down.

"It couldn't be natural, what happened to the world," Bruno said as he picked up a shovel and started digging. Felix picked the other one and they dug back-to-back.

"Why not natural?" Felix asked.

"Maybe it could — some twist in the geometry of space forms words in response to our sounds. I assumed it wasn't natural and went looking for spots where it wouldn't happen."

"Why did it all start?"

"Maybe it was a political thing," Bruno said. "Somebody was planning a form of thought control, but it got out of hand. A while back, I think, our politicos contacted an alien civilization in some far space, a mind contact maybe, and learned how to construct ... certain devices. Perhaps the alien culture thought it would help us think more concisely." He laughed. "It's more than poetic prankery, you see. Language, as much as tool-making, is directly responsible for the growth of our intelligence and self-consciousness. We're as smart or stupid by how well we use words. It's the automatic programs, the habits, that deaden the mind, the dogmatic mazes...."

He paused. "Not this hole, we've got to try elsewhere."

Bruno might simply be crazy, Felix thought, nothing more.

"If you wanted to affect a culture," Bruno continued, "put a restriction on its use of language and watch native ingenuity increase, like the improvement of hearing in the blind...."

Felix climbed out of the hole and gave Bruno a hand up.

A wind was blowing across the landfill, soughing through the strange trees as if it were slowly becoming aware of the intruders. Leaves lay strewn everywhere. Some seemed to be stained by decay, like old, misshapen coins; others were curling into small tubes. The wind quickened into a gust, swirling them into disarray, imparting its energy of motion to raise them into the air. Again Felix had the sensation of standing at the edge of the world. He wondered what June would think if she were to see him here with Bruno.

Then he noticed that the trees seemed to be shaped like letters, bent and distorted, echoing the millions of words buried in the ground.

"Let's dig by one of the trees," Bruno said. The seven words flew out of his mouth and were lifted by the wind, which deposited them in the branches, where they sat like blackbirds.

Felix went up to the nearest tree and started digging. Bruno joined in. The sun climbed toward noon.

"Testing," Bruno said. No word appeared. "Maybe it was something in our minds that was altered, to make the words when we speak...."

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"You mean there may be no machine?"

"What's that?" Bruno asked, pointing.

A crystalline rod was protruding from the dirt in the hole. Felix stepped into the hole and continued digging while Bruno rested. Slowly, a complex mechanism was uncovered, a cube-like shape of glassy-metallic connections, a maze of shiny pipes and joints, mirror surfaces and solid figures.

"It's ... like a large piece of jewelry," Felix said.

"I was afraid of this," Bruno said. "I thought there might be a relay device, a generator, the thing that changed speech into solid objects, worldwide, of course. I was hoping to find the local station in the net...."

"Well, what's this then?"

Bruno clutched at his chest and fell forward, easing himself down with the shovel.

"You're ill," Felix said, squatting down next to him.

"My heart ... but listen. I may die, but you have to listen...."

A demented stare came into Bruno's face, as if he knew that his understanding of the truth was superior to all the deceiving forces around him. He pulled himself backward on the ground, until he was sitting up against the tree, one foot in the hole.

"Try not to move, I'll get help," Felix said.

"Listen!" He raised his hand to his eyes and rubbed them. Then he stared at the alien artifact and spoke, his voice a low, silken tenor. "Humankind fell into a dream. Maybe it was the result of some massive failure, brought on by the straining of psyches long overworked with the yoke of metaphor and simile, paradigm and tautology — in a creature that longed to know the universe directly, tired of sense-show charades, the shadows of real things projected through the dirty windows of the eye, the noisy avenues of the ear...."

His voice grew plaintive and sad. "We grew discouraged by the blindness of touch, the lie of taste and smell, disappointed by the children's universe of not-too-little and not-too-much, of knowing and not knowing, of anxious flight from ignorance into only relative knowledge, stretched tightly between the extremes of sufficiency and insufficiency, between the great and small. We would never be all-knowing, yet we were not *nothing*. The hopelessness of carrot and stick futility was too much, driving us into this common delusion, whose meaning we cannot grasp...." He closed his eyes and Felix saw tears in his friend's face.

"But maybe it is an alien yoke," Felix said.

"I would prefer that, but this silly machine...."

He coughed and clutched his chest.

"Bruno — you can't die!"

Felix picked up the shovel and struck the ornate machine. It was a blow for objectivity, forging a way into

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a universe outside delusion, for an end to the torment of the brute words struggling to break out of him. He hit the machine again; maybe the blow would alter something in the human mind.

"Even if we end this," Bruno whispered loudly, "we don't know what else we may awaken into."

Felix struck the machine a third time.

"It's only a projection of our wish, Felix, to find an answer...."

The world grew dark and the wind threw branches onto them and the machine. The device shimmered and disappeared. The branches were like snakes as Felix struggled to free himself. There was a horrible sound from Bruno. Felix crawled toward him and looked into his face. Bruno's eyes were open, glassy, like the crystal of the machine, staring into an abyss.

Felix cursed. Two copies of the word appeared and settled on Bruno's chest.

Anthony Boucher's "The Quest for St. Acquin," Philip K. Dick's "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale," Daniel Keyes' "Flowers for Algernon," Richard Matheson's "Born of Man and Woman," and Robert Silverberg's "Sundance" are just five of the more than 20 stories that will be included in F&SF's 320-page, 30th anniversary October 1979 issue. Send us immediately the coupon on page 55 to be sure of receiving this collector's item.

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Technological extrapolation in sf is usually on a grand scale, but sometimes the apparently insignificant details can be important — for example, the packaging of foods . . .

Standoff

BY

RAYLYN MOORE

The first man was in bad shape. Some of the gaping holes in his uniform suggested entanglement with the barbs of a fence or with the thorny dry brush which grew abundantly in this mountainous area. Others obviously represented the ravages of a blunt knife in a panic sawing-away of insignia of rank and — over the left breast — rows of service ribbons.

His cap was gone. Filaments of straw-colored hair, left extra-long by the barber for brushing across the prominent bald spot, were now pasted by sweat to a dirty forehead made dirtier by the man's nervous gesture of wiping at it with hands used to clutch at the crumbling reddish earth as he pulled himself over escarpments.

He panted with painful audibleness; his eyes were so thoroughly bloodshot scarcely a dot of white remained in the sclera; the soft flesh rode the narrow bones with a visible trembling. He had managed, however, to hang onto his suitcase.

The second man was much younger. He too was smeared with reddish earth stains, but on the sun-browned skin of his face and broad chest the dirt seemed more suitable somehow. He wore jeans faded nearly white and far too large at the waist, held there by a length of cotton rope, the kind used for laundry lines. The jean legs had been ripped away just above the knees, exposing the slightly bowed, thickly hirsute limbs of a healthy peasant. On his feet were a badly scuffed but clearly new pair of combat boots.

Both men had run out of fuel at approximately the same place, but not at the same time.

Earlier in the day the first man had commandeered a shabby four-cylinder car from a frightened fourteen-year-

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old youth who had stalled it on a hill. The boy was thin, small for his age, and alone. It had been merely a matter of getting into the driver's seat on the pretense of helping restart the car, then slapping the boy senseless and shoving his body out the far door.

Then the man drove south for three hours. The motor finally stopped dead after the tank had registered empty for several miles. Actually the car had a reserve fuel supply which could be tapped by turning a lever, but the first man didn't know this.

This had happened at eleven hundred hours. Mapless, the man had no idea how far it was to the next town. Going back was out of the question since to the north was where the most recent outbreak of trouble was. Staying on the road in sight of possible passing traffic would be foolish, garbed as he was in a uniform tunic and trousers which despite their condition were easily identifiable as custom-made of expensive material.

He had not been able in the emergency to put his hands on anything else to wear except female dress from the apartment of the woman who had hidden him the previous night. And though in his extremity he had considered this, even tentatively selected a platinum wig and mauve suit (the most conservative of the costumes available), he had fortunately remembered to consider also the possible threat of being arrested by the occasionally still-active civilian police as a transvestite freak after his beard would begin to shadow.

While standing uncertainly beside the stopped car, gripping his suitcase in one hand, with the other lightly touching the handgun in his belt for reassurance, he noticed a roughly demarked sideroad, undistinguished by any sign and nearly overgrown with weeds and brambles, leading off up the mountain to the east.

Two hours after this the younger man coasted to a halt alongside the abandoned small car, thinking he might switch to it from the motor scooter he'd stolen from an unlocked garage in the suburbs to the north. The scooter wouldn't do over forty on the road, and the motor was now sputtering as the tank ran dry.

But the key was gone from the car. (The older man, acting reflexively as a member of a responsible society he was no longer sure existed, had pocketed it as he left.) Crossing ignition wires seemed hardly worth the risk of being seen doing it on the road where at least sporadic traffic was to be expected, even though the second man was reasonably sure the car would go some distance, for the reserve fuel lever had not been turned.

He too noticed the obsolete road hung on the side of the mountain and, rather than remain exposed on the highway any longer, struck off up the slope through the brush in a pathless course roughly parallel to the overgrown lane. He wanted to see if the

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road led to some possible hiding-place for himself, while avoiding the party who had dumped the car. For that person might be still around, perhaps at that moment walking either up or down the lane, concealing himself in it.

The older man was not at this time, however, in the lane, nor had he been for some time. After a quarter hour's hike up its clogged course, he had been struck by the identical cautious thought, that being in a visible thoroughfare might lead to exposure sooner than making a trackless ascent to the same destination.

What the lane led to — as both men were to discover at about the same moment from different vantages, after having climbed the mountain at their different rates of speed — was nothing. Or approximately nothing: a ghost town built in a previous era around a mining operation which had not lasted long. Seventy-five years after the mine stopped producing another ephemeral project had been undertaken at the same site by a film company, with the result that the settlement had been rendered ghostly not once but twice, the vestiges of the latter effort superimposed upon the former.

While the sight of the double row of falling-down shacks hidden in a fold of the mountain caused both men consciously to think the words "ghost town," it should be explained here that the term had already lost much of its older meaning in the face of current events which had put the three major cities in the eastern part of the nation into the same category. In these cities, now, the remaining buildings were said to have been abandoned even by the rats. More recently, the second largest western city had joined these metropolises-without-inhabitants, but in this case all was leveled, the tallest remaining prominence rising no higher than a ten-foot length of inexplicably unmelted gaspi[illegible] angling through the rubble. The western city's status as a true ghost town might, because of this, be challenged, there being no habitation remaining fit even for a haunting spirit. But there was no question that the ghost town phenomenon was on the upswing. In the case of smaller cities everywhere, the thing often happened overnight, or at an hour's notice.

But this is only one perspective on what was happening. Here is another, equally bleak: As in all wars in the final stages of being disastrously lost, the forces most directly responsible for the violence were themselves being consumed by violence from within.

The chiefs of staff, besieged by looters, food rioters, and mutineers in a capital which had so far miraculously been spared, were not so demoralized, however, that they had neglected to transmit the traditional order: "Hold out to the last man. Our brave troops, supported by fresh reinforcements and limitless quantities of material from our impregnable underground arsenals, will turn the tide."

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Field commanders had sensibly toned down the message before passing it on to their tactical commanders, who sighed and shrugged; conscripts in the field, hearing only rumors of the heroic message, burst into fits of laughter or rage, according to individual disposition.

Even so colonels ordered majors, captains ordered lieutenants, to arrest all those refusing to obey. Military police attempted to carry out these arrests. In many cases the MP's were shot from ambush or bayoneted as they stepped through doorways or around corners.

Infuriated high-ranking officers retaliated by convening courts-martial and (suspending all codes of military justice) condemning in absentia whole units to death by rifle fire. A few attempts were actually made to carry out these sentences. None was successful; most of the would-be executioners were wiped out early by counterforces acting under orders of the newly formed soldiers' councils, which had in turn condemned to death by rifle fire all officers with commission status.

Almost unbelievably, instance after instance occurred in which large groups of officers, taking sanctuary in social clubs and other places off-limits to enlisted personnel, were cut down by small-arms fire at close range. Dying in hot pools of their own and their brother-officers' blood, they would be struck with outraged bewilderment that the council troops had with such apparent ease managed to overturn sacred protocol by setting foot in a place forbidden to them seemingly since the beginning of time.

This failure to grasp the true dimensions of what was happening was enhanced in another direction when the western city was demolished and mass communications systems were knocked out. With no one, not even the professional purveyors of propaganda, to tell them how things were going and what they should think, many on both sides fled in panic by whatever means they could contrive. Most of the peripheral fears — starvation, death by radiation, running afoul of one of the berserk mobs that filled the streets of still-habitable communities all around the newly devastated areas — were indeed well founded. And for those running either from the MP's or the soldiers' councils, the specific fear of recognition, arrest and sudden death combined with the other, inchoate fears of all kinds to make them even more desperate.

The first man arrived at the deserted mining camp at thirteen-thirty hours, having taken two and a half hours to haul himself and his suitcase up the mountain, with rest stops.

The younger man arrived at thirteen-thirty hours, having taken twenty-five minutes to climb the mountain, without rest stops, and five minutes to circle the settlement so as to come up on its far side, away from the end of the ancient lane.

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The silence in the fold of the mountain was monumental.

On either side of a weed-clotted "main street" were the two rows of frame buildings, most of them far gone in deterioration. There was no way to determine, at a glance, which of the structures were parts of the original town and which contributed by the construction crew of the film company. All had more or less a weather-scoured, aged look, achieved either technologically or by the attrition of nature. A broken wine jug with a still-legible label, some scattered beer cans, and a rain-washed cardboard poster plastered crookedly to one of the standing walls hinted of visitors more recent than either the miners or the film makers.

The second man viewed the scene from behind an earthwork which was a pile of fill from a privy now vanished. The place would have looked fairly safe but for the nagging thought of the unknown person or persons who'd ditched the car. There had been a tight scrape the previous day which was still fresh in his mind. MP's had charged the front and rear doors of a tenement while he was hiding in the end of a heating vent in the basement. He had no weapon. There had been a knife with his clothes, which even hours later he hadn't dared return upstairs in the tenement for, but nothing useful to him in the basement when he finally left the vent except the jeans, which he had removed from a drying line.

It occurred to him now that even if the person from the car never showed, he couldn't stay here long without food or water. The chance of there being water, however, was not hopeless. It had once been a town, hadn't it? So there might still be a waterpipe to the place from some mountain spring, maybe even the spring itself nearby. Food was something else. There would be nothing inside the houses; they were hollow shells not lived in for a century or more. He had seen no animal life on the way up, not even lizards. The possibility of edible weeds was even more remote. At this season all the herbage on the mountain was dried yellow.

Meanwhile the first man, seated flat on the ground in a concealing patch of scrub behind a building at the opposite end of the town, had recovered sufficiently from the climb to review his situation, and to curse himself for poor planning. The fold in the mountain, hidden from the highway, was a perfect hiding place, he had seen at once, good for an indefinite time. Or it would have been if there were no car at the bottom of the slope to draw attention to the lane, which by itself would not have been at all noticeable.

He knew now he should have shoved the car up the next rise in the highway and let it roll down the other side so it wouldn't be so closely connected with someone perhaps up the mountain. It had been a bad mistake, he decided, but possibly not a fatal

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one. At least no one had arrived yet. He had the place all to himself, he thought, and probably would have for a long time. And if someone did come, later, there was the gun stuck in his belt, gently prodding his belly in a comforting way each time he moved.

Also, badly deteriorated as they were, he had the buildings. In at least one of them, he knew, it would be possible to hide in relative comfort. Not the kind of comfort his body ached for, certainly, but he would be sheltered from the punishing daytime sun, warm against the night winds, possibly even able to have an inside fire in a fireplace for cooking and making tea (from where he sat he could see several well-preserved fieldstone chimneys) — if he could find a source of water.

The food should last quite a while, well into the rainy season (if he stayed that long) when the mountain would perhaps provide him with greens to bring variety to the store of supplies in the suitcase. It had been good thinking to bring along the hundreds of small metal cylinders of highly concentrated field rations. If he used them at the rate of, say, two a day, they would sustain him indefinitely.

Thought of the food made him realize suddenly how ravenous he was, and not just from the hike up the slope. Preoccupied with getting away, he had allowed himself no time for eating or even the thought of it for something like thirty-six hours.

Without moving from where he was on the flat ground, he dragged the suitcase toward himself and opened it. He took out one of the small metal canisters and examined it. In all his career years, he'd never had occasion to resort to rations before. In fact, when he'd first seen the cans spilling out of a wrecked truck in a deserted alley, he hadn't even recognized them for what they were. Reason alone told him to dump everything else out of the suitcase he carried and load it with the windfall. If someone had gone to the trouble to load a truck with them and try to make a getaway, they had to be valuable.

Somewhere, somehow — he could not recall the circumstances — during the recent days of terror he had lost his glasses so he was helpless to read the fine black print ringing the base of the container. But his fingers explored meticulously. Somewhere there should be a ring to pull or a strip of metal to peel back. Surely no rations in such an advanced age would require any tool so primitive as a can opener.

He found nothing. Doggedly he went over the can surface again, then felt through his pockets. He had no implement capable of sawing through metal. The car key, which he was surprised to find there, was no help.

Again he examined the object in his hand, seeing now that it was not so much a cylinder as an absolutely smooth, apparently seamless cartridge shaped like a very large egg truncated

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at top and bottom. The rations had been sealed expertly all right, the triumphant work of some preservative-packaging specialist hired by the government, possibly in the months just before everything began to fall apart. How was it then, in view of having been able to achieve such a coup with even its field rations, that so great a military force had fallen?

He pressed the thought away as a new wave of hunger assaulted him. He could not recall ever having been so hungry. He levered himself painfully from the ground and got into motion, walking stiff-jointedly down the row of houses. He pushed open a sagging door at random, letting himself into a room with a well-preserved floor and some furniture, but there was not so much as an ice pick in the lean-to part that had apparently served as kitchen.

Next door, though, his short search was rewarded. A hacksaw blade, only slightly rusted, waited under a layer of dust on a cobwebby windowsill. Quickly he carried it back to where he'd left the suitcase and began sawing off the top of the rations cartridge. He was gratified almost instantly by the sight of a small pile of glittering metal dust forming under his hands. He sawed even more energetically, having to hold the can lower down because of friction heat.

And then the metal dust stopped piling up and he saw his mistake. On the middle of the blade, the part he'd been rubbing against the can, the saw-teeth were destroyed, scraped entirely away by the harder metal of the can. The rations were evidently protected by some kind of specially tempered steel or other metal designed to resist — everything, damnit!

Caught in an emotion halfway between still-cognitive annoyance and witless desperation, he grabbed the can with both hands, top and bottom, and twisted, with the notion it might open on a threaded middle, like those plastic Easter eggs with trinkets inside. But that didn't work either. He tried pressing in and twisting at the same time in hope the thing might be made to open like a child-proof pill bottle. No such luck.

With desperation winning out, he snatched the gun from his belt and set the can several feet away and aimed. Common sense, however, intervened before he could pull the trigger. If the metal were not penetrable by bullet, the high-caliber slug would be spent for nothing, and he had to be careful of his ammunition; he had a limited supply, only what was in the gun and one small box in his back trouser pocket, tab buttoned carefully over it as if for proof against pickpockets.

He had one more inspiration: reverse screw threading. But applying a clockwise twist wasn't the answer either.

For a full quarter hour after this he just sat glumly staring at the innocuous-looking olive-drab can with the printed letters at its base. He was surer

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than ever that the secret was told there, in that ring of official print, but he could imagine no way to take advantage of it. He had begun to feel drained of everything, even his hunger, and overwhelmingly weary.

Finally he tossed the container aside and stretched out full length in the dust.

He slept no more than twenty minutes.

Something nudged him to consciousness abruptly. Not a noise, he was fairly sure of that. Rather some subliminal sense of peril which may have been there from the beginning but which he had had to sink into a state of total relaxation to apprehend.

Again he got to his feet, but this time he was fully alert, scrupulously cautious. His right hand had gone automatically to the butt of the gun and he kept it there while he looked slowly around. Everything seemed as it had been, the suitcase lying open against an outcropping rock, the single ration can resting where it had rolled after he'd tossed it away in frustration.

Then, in the pervading stillness — he experienced a keen realization that there was no wind, no sound supplied by birds or animals — he distinguished a faint rustling from quite near, a sustained brushing sound as of someone moving along hugging a wall. It seemed to come from the interior of the closest building, the one just beside his patch of scrub.

Fear watered his muscles and when he hauled out the gun his wrist quivered with the sudden weight of it. Yet his voice rang brittle with authority. "Stop where you are."

The silence, which had quickly reestablished itself, ate his words.

He knew well enough that his behavior was ill-advised if not foolhardy. The patch of brush did not conceal him from the house. On the other side of the near wall, inside the shack, there could be an armed adversary with him full in the sights of another weapon, a bead already drawn on his brain. Yet what alternative did he have but to bluff it out, to behave by the only rules he knew for such an exigency? He tried again. "Advance and give your name, or I'll fire."

Nothing, only the flat echo of the absurd speech. But after that a sudden rattle of heavily shod feet running on stony ground.

The first man plunged out of his brush cover and around the corner of the shack. The second man was in full flight less than twenty yards away, a moving but not impossible target in the wide space between the building rows.

"Halt!"

To the first man's mild surprise, the second man actually did halt. Then he turned slowly, shoulders warily hunched, and the two stared at each other. Not into each other's faces. Even at that distance the eyes of the

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second locked on the jagged holes above the breastpocket of the first man's tunic, while those of the first fixed on the pair of new combat boots. (Such is the contradiction of hypermetropia; at a little distance, the first man could see very keenly without glasses.)

Again it was the older man who spoke, and this time questions of possible foolhardiness or the need to bluff didn't enter into the matter. For he experienced no fear now, only slow-rising anger in a situation he felt competent to handle because it had suddenly taken on a familiar shape. "You're not just AWOL, are you, soldier? You're a deserter, aren't you?"

The younger man said nothing but the question answered itself, of course. He had stopped staring at the breastpocket holes now and was glazedly regarding the barrel of the gun aimed at his viscera.

"I suppose you know that because of the circumstances I'm authorized to shoot you on sight?"

Still there was no answer. The younger man remained frozen, perhaps in fear, perhaps in wait for some antic inspiration or chance intervention that would turn the tide. It now occurred to the man in the torn blouse that he had again erred, this time from overconfidence and the too-easily-invoked anger. He had forgotten that the man in front of his weapon might have a friend or friends still in hiding. It took a supreme exertion of willpower not to look over his own shoulder.

Because he could no longer endure the building suspense of not being able to read clearly the exact expression on the younger man's face, the man with the gun began walking slowly forward, pacing off fourteen or so yards, keeping his weapon hand as steady as he could, until the two were less than twelve feet apart.

Near enough, he decided judiciously, and his confidence all washed back at what he saw. In the deserter's clear, pale eyes — made to seem even paler by contrast with the bronze of his skin — there was no hint of cunning, or of expectancy that help would come, only fear and the sick look of lost hope.

So the man expected to be shot; he must even be wondering why it hadn't happened yet.

Why, indeed? Every second lost gave the younger man a new chance to recover and think of some ruse. Not that it was so likely now that it was plain that he had no accomplice. The officer's hand tightened on the gun, the second joint of his right index finger lying lightly ready on the trigger. He was no stranger to firearms, had faithfully kept up his target practice, never wanting to become one of those cosseted commissioned fools who buried themselves in paperwork and in the end couldn't tell a magnum from a messkit.

As for killing a human being in cold blood, that didn't apply, for his own blood still ran hot with the hatred, though it was a steadier, more rational

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hatred now, aimed not so much at this single man as at what he represented. Insubordination, desertion of duty, mutiny, treason. This pale-eyed, earth-smeared youth had been the true enemy all along; but for him and his like, the world wouldn't have gone to hell the way it did, everything lost, nothing left.

Now.

He squeezed off the shot with the barrel aimed squarely at the man's chest, but the sudden, last-minute memory of the field rations can pulled the slug slightly to the left and down, so that the bullet crashed between the soldier's slightly lifted arm and his body and into the stony earth several yards behind him.

The enormity of the blast in that silent place seemed to shake the surrounding hills, the echo volleying for many seconds.

He kept the gun leveled where it had been before, and spoke in a crisp conversational tone totally void of emotion. "I almost forgot something. Get your hands in the air and start walking straight ahead. I'll be right behind you. Walk to the end of this row of shacks and I'll tell you what to do then."

Before the second man passed him in a careful arc, doing as he had been ordered, the first man read the changed expression on his captive's face. Blank, stunned puzzlement had already wiped away both the fear and the hopelessness.

At the end of the one-time street, the older man told the younger to right-face toward the brush cover, to advance toward the open suitcase and take out one of the cans.

"That's right, soldier," he said sternly, maintaining the twelve-foot distance between them and keeping the gun up. "Now open it."

For the first time the second man spoke. "What?"

"You heard me."

Almost involuntarily, the younger man spoke his thoughts. "You some kinda lunatic, dad?"

"Just do as I say."

"I never been so in love with this garbage I'd want it for a last meal."

"It's not for you."

A dawnburst of comprehension now appeared on the bronze face. There was even a kind of smile which drew one corner of the man's thick lips higher than the other. "So we're up here all alone, huh? You ain't got nobody and I ain't got nobody."

"What does that have to do with it? Open that can."

"You need me to crack them cans and I need you to share the chow. Ain't that a hell of a thing?"

The degree of confidence the prisoner had suddenly regained, after being only moments before resigned to his death, was amazing and faintly troubling, the older man felt. Well, it would soon all be over. "Soldier, I am going to count to three. If you don't have that ration package open, I'm go-

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ing to blow your head off."

But it wasn't going to work. It was fantastic how all fear of the gun seemed to have evaporated even though the weapon was still trained on him. The pale eyes now reflected a wild kind of high spirits, almost a merriment. "No, you won't, dad. But that don't mean I ain't going to open the can for you. We got to do for each other from now on." Carelessly he tossed the can once into the air where it spun dizzily in the afternoon sun, caught it again, held it for a mysterious moment behind his back, then presented it again to the other's full view. "Easiest thing in the world. See?"

The container was now in two halves, one side stuffed with smaller packages wrapped in soft metal foil. Several of these spilled out onto the ground in front of the younger man's scarred boots.

Though there was of course no food odor, the first man felt a violent resurge of his hunger. With effort he kept himself from grabbing at the packets.

Instead he replied menacingly, or in a tone he hoped would sound menacing, even though he knew he had already lost his authority: "No, I did not see. I want you to show me how you did it."

The younger man grinned. "Not on your life, dad. But I'll open you all you want the way I did that one. It's real easy if you got the hang of it."

Now the officer lowered the handgun slightly, backed off several more paces, and sat down heavily on a boulder. The weapon was still ready and would have to be for a long time to come, but the meaning of its being between them had changed. "At ease, soldier," he said tiredly.

With a mockery in his movements, the younger man doubled up and sat cross-legged on the ground facing his captor.

With his left hand the first man swiped at a loose-hanging hair strand, plastered it carefully back onto his sweaty scalp, and tried to think what to do next, but the only thought that came was a singularly unhelpful one. It occurred to him how wrong he had been to admire the technology that packaged the field rations. Instead of a benefit it might actually have been a causative factor in the destruction of civilization. In fact he was sure of it (as he remembered wrestling in former times with the seals on bottles, the uncuttable and untearable plastics around cold cuts and cheese, the sardine cans without keys) — any society that would seal off its edibles so they could be got to only by dull-witted brutes who knew nothing else.

The second man continued to grin.

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When it comes to sex almost anything goes these days — even in Hell. But there are exceptions . . .

Playback

BY

LARRY TRITTEN

A moment after the bullet hit him in the back, tearing through muscle and shattering bone before twisting abruptly and erratically upward to lodge fatally in his heart, Elliot Holt materialized in an enormous basalt cavern — one of Hell's sundry antechambers for the reception of souls in transit. Holt gasped and took a wavering step backward. He looked around. Where, seconds before, there had been a tangerine suede couch on which a reclining dark-eyed redhead wearing only knee-length black leather boots regarded him with an insatiable gaze, there now loomed a jagged cluster of stalagmites carved in the shape of nose-thumbing demons. The subtle scent of Le De Givenchy was gone, replaced by an overwhelming stench of ozone and sulfur fumes, and instead of the melancholy sound of Charlie Byrd's unamplified guitar issuing softly from a background stereo speaker, there was a faint undertone of verbal sibilance coming from somewhere — a sound like a distant chorus of sniveling voices.

A demon who looked something like a cross between Frank Zappa and a Gila monster appeared, causing Holt to cringe instinctively.

"Hello, Holt. Jealous husbands make excellent marksmen, eh?"

"Jesus Christ!" Holt gasped.

"Hardly," said the demon. "Still, you needn't cringe. I'll lay it on you straight. We don't have possession rights yet. To your soul, that is. There's some red tape involved, and you may beat the rap yet, so keep it cool, okay? I won't bite."

Holt shuffled his feet uncomfortably and made a bold effort to straighten his shoulders, but when he said, "Red tape?" his voice was a diminished squeak.

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The demon smiled expansively. "You're a lucky man, Holt. You can be thankful you were living in hip times. With your particular transgressions, if you'd showed up a hundred, even, say, fifty years ago, I'd already have you mired in the Eternal Jello, or maybe being sewn into the Living Fabric in one of our sweatshops. But times change, values change." The demon shrugged. "I just take orders. The point is, as I said, you're going to get a chance."

Holt said, hopefully, "A chance?"

The demon nodded. "It's a policy, part of the new Declaration of Trespasses we worked out with the flyboys. You see, Holt, popular belief notwithstanding, we actually work hand-in-glove with the harp pluckers. Sort of like Democrats and Republicans, you might say. We're on different teams, but necessarily cooperative when it comes to matters of policy. The thing is, back about fifty years ago sexual morality topside started to undergo a drastic change. Came your "sexual revolution," and the next thing we knew about ninety per cent of the deceased were dropping in on us slated for punishment for offenses that could be considered "sins" only by outmoded Victorian standards...."

The demon paused, sighed, conjured a handful of dead mice, and popped one into his mouth like a Lifesaver. Chewing thoughtfully, he went on: "No balance was being maintained. It wasn't really fair to you people, of course, and besides we didn't have facilities for the sudden influx. So the flyboys sent a delegation and we worked out a new Declaration of Trespasses. It gives sex a pretty clean sweep. The way it reads, *consenting* adults can get away with just about anything now — leather and whip trips, group stuff, weird fetish trips, just about everything that used to be taboo, it's all okay now. A thing like rape — that's different. But you gratify your itch any way short of using force or intimidation on your partner, you're home safe. We reflect the going values these days. In short, we're *hip!*"

Hearing this, Holt relaxed slightly. But only slightly. He was familiar enough with stories about people in his situation to know that one could never exercise too much caution when dealing with demons. Besides, what was he doing here, anyway? The only serious vices he'd ever indulged or cultivated came under the heading of carnality. Strike those, and it had to be admitted he'd led a substantially virtuous life. As the number-one international box-office film star for three consecutive years, he had seen every imaginable kind of duplicity and corruption in evidence among his social peers, but he had always remained remote from it all, content to concentrate on his single avocation, that of attempting to coax ninety-eight per cent of the reasonably attractive females who crossed his path into his bed.

Reflecting on this, Holt exclaimed,

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with a touch of indignation, "I don't see why *I'm* here. What have *I* done that's so bad?"

"Well, yes, of course," said the demon absently, despatching the last mouse and picking at his teeth with a scimitar-like fingernail. He frowned. "Now, in your case it was your adventures as an adulterer that got you here. As I said, of course, adultery *per se* is no offense these days — but, you see, these matters are fraught with pertinent *nuances*. It was primarily your *style*, Holt." The demon fixed him with a baleful eye, blood red. "Adultery is common topside, to be sure, but remember what I said about *consenting* couples? That hardly covers your frequent use of aphrodisiacs sneaked into drinks, or your similar use of all sorts of fraudulent promises and enticements to achieve your goal — and then there were the *effects* of some of your capers: a lot of stable marriages turned upside down, and without your thinking twice about the concomitant damage being inflicted on your—" the demon smiled blandly. "—victims."

Suddenly, and just as Holt was preparing to argue his case, the demon produced an illustrated brochure, thrusting it at Holt with enthusiasm. "Now, before I explain about the chance you're getting," he exclaimed, businesslike, "here are some of the punishments available to souls in your category! Nothing really brutally agonizing like in the old days, of course, but enough to keep you eternally repentant, we think."

Reluctantly, Holt leafed through the brochure. Above a caption that said THIRTY YEAR SPECIAL, he saw a photograph of a man as emaciated as a veteran of Dachau, prostrate and spread-eagled, his limbs bound to pegs, with a chicken turning on a rotisserie spit inches above his face. And on the facing page, above a similar caption, another picture showed a man seated on a slab of basalt wearily reading a huge bound volume of *The Congressional Record* while a demon holding a pair of poised pinking shears stood vigilantly at his side, presumably prepared to use the shears the instant his charge's attention lapsed.

Abruptly queasy, Holt handed back the brochure. "Wh—what was that about a ... chance?" he asked.

"You get a playback," said the demon.

"A playback?"

"That's it," said the demon. "I'll explain, but first let me explain about your other transgression — the narcissism." He waggled a reproving forefinger. "Really, Holt, *quite bad!* It all comes under the Sin of Pride. You can check the book. Did you know, in fact, that you ranked tenth among the top twenty cases of Self Adoration in the whole world, aced out only by a few politicians, a couple of other show-biz personalities, and a well-known Southern California used-car dealer?"

Holt did his best to look apologetic,

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but he realized, with a sinking sensation, that it was pointless. The demon's stone-cold glare made that clear.

"Now, as I said," the demon hurried on, "we're going to give you a playback. Both the narcissism and your predatory bedside manner fit the category of sexual errors, and one of the clauses in the new declaration gives medium-grade sex offenders — that's you! — a second chance. A playback. The idea is, if you muff it, then we get you. Otherwise, it's the wild blue yonder. It's a sporting chance, and about fifty per cent beat the rap."

"But would you please *explain* what you *mean* by a playback?" Holt said, trying very hard not to show his growing anxiety.

The demon nodded. "What we do," he said, "is we materialize you back on earth, though not necessarily as *yourself* — in the same body, that is — and then we hit you with some unexpected temptation or other. And if you successfully resist it, you win your wings...."

Holt narrowed his eyes suspiciously, but he also felt a sporting surge of anticipation as he listened to the demon conclude: "You go back as what we call, roughly speaking, "conscience" or "will." A pure mental entity. You control the body. It's your show, and you either win or lose on your initiative. Check?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, so?" said the demon, arching an eyebrow.

"I don't want to be tricked."

"Tricked?" The demon bared his teeth in a spontaneous grimace. Intimidated, Holt quickly revived his apologetic look, whereupon the demon shrugged, snapped his fingers (igniting sparks), and Holt felt himself being sucked suddenly upward as if by a colossal vacuum cleaner. There was a vivid tumbling sensation then, followed by a sudden blackout, but not before he heard the demon's voice, placid and toneless, coming to him through what seemed an endless echo chamber. "Of course, we do like to give you an *interesting* challenge...."

The new setting quivered gelatinously, shaping itself gradually and tremulously around Holt like a slowly focusing picture. He became conscious first of his *(his?)* body, then of its comfortable reclining posture, and finally of a strong underlying sense of nervous excitability. He moved his head very slightly against one of the satin-covered pillows, simultaneously feeling the crisp sweep of long auburn tresses on his naked shoulders.

Then, through eyes narrowed with dismay, he saw the man advancing slowly and confidently toward him; he realized who the man was, and abruptly, with an oblique downward glance, who *he* was....

He/she thought, desperately, *I must not, must not....*

"*Carissima,*" whispered the man softly, and the familiar word, the

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familiar voice, the familiar self-assured smile brought the redhead to a sudden half-sitting position on the couch, desire stirring uncontrollably inside her with primitive force as she watched the powerful, athletic body loom nearer.

He/she almost strangled trying to keep the cry of protest from turning to a murmur of assent in his/her throat.

But unsuccessfully.

Yielding, the redhead accepted the actor's proffered embrace while the last mellow chord of *Let It Be* reverberated from Charlie Byrd's guitar in the background. She sighed, but there was a muted quality to the sigh, a heaviness, and the last thing she saw before blacking out was her own reflection in the mirror on the ceiling, mouth and eyes contorted with a look of agonized contentment. Then the door to the room was flung open....

"Win a few, lose a few," quipped the demon as Holt reappeared. "But you want to know the truth, I had *you* pegged from the start. A true mirror-poser!"

Holt felt like crying but instead swallowed hard, rallying courage. "Wh—what now?" he managed weakly.

The demon held out a pack of cards. "Pick a card. Any card."

Holt picked one.

"Turn it over. It's what we give you for the first century."

The card said BURYING GIRAFFES, and no sooner had Holt read it than he found himself on a vast dun-colored veldt, a shovel at his feet. As far as he could see in every direction there were dead giraffes, thousands of them. Long-necked ones.

Wondering if there would be breaks, Holt started to dig.

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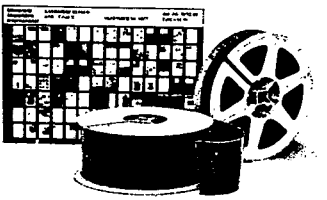

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Alan Ryan was born in New York City in 1943, attended Jesuit schools there and was a Graduate Fellow in English at the University of California, Los Angeles for two years. Following that, he spent nine years teaching English, drama, creative writing and dance criticism. He is currently a regular book reviewer for the New York Times Book Review *and has recently begun to write fiction.*

"You're Welcome," Said the Robot, and Turned To Watch the Snowflakes

BY

ALAN RYAN

The robot at the reception desk looked up from its typewriter and smiled pleasantly.

"Good morning, Mr. Benedetto," it said cheerfully.

"Morning," grunted Benny Benedetto.

The door from the lobby swung shut behind him with a solid thunk, its usual morning greeting. Last time for that, he thought. No, wait. Once more. When I leave this afternoon. Then it'll be the last time, after fifteen years. And I won't miss it.

He stopped in front of the reception desk and began pulling the scarf from around his neck.

"I'll take that, sir," a voice said behind him.

Benny handed over the scarf, slipped out of his overcoat, and tossed it toward the robot-valet. The RV caught it deftly, draped it carefully over one arm, and started toward the closet on the other side of the large paneled reception office. A tiny grinding noise whispered up from the treads at its base.

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Damn thing still does that, Benny thought. Some maladjustment in the linkage. Been like that ever since they put that one into service. Remember I used to mention it to Freddy Jonathan at least once a week. Oh, well, it doesn't matter anymore, not to me, not after today. Not after fifteen years.

The receptionist was still looking up, smiling, its head cocked slightly to one side.

"It must be a strange feeling for you today," it said slowly and thoughtfully. "Leaving International Robots after fifteen years. I guess you'll miss the place. But then it must be nice to retire, too." Its voice trailed off on a musing note.

Benny turned and met the robot's thoughtful eyes. Then he leaned forward, placed the heels of his hands on the front edge of the desk, and looked closely into the robot's startled face.

"Tell me," he said, "do you have any conception of what it's like to retire from a job?"

The robot hesitated. "I have a good idea of it," it said slowly, dropping its gaze to the desk for a moment. Then, "Yes, I do," it said. Its chin came up, its eyes grew wider, the whole face brightened. "Now you'll have a chance to do all the things you've always wanted to do. Relax. Travel. Read. Sleep late in the mornings. Live happily on your pension from the company and be able to look back on a job well done for fifteen years."

It smiled with obvious satisfaction at its insight into the question. Satisfaction and maybe just a touch of pride? Benny wondered. God, you never know what's buried in those protein circuits. Sometimes we build better than even we know. He sighed and straightened up, turning away.

"And you're still a young man," the robot added.

Benny blinked. Damn. I may be the best tutor the company ever had, he thought, but sometimes the damn things can be downright spooky.

Slowly, he turned back to face the robot. He put his hands into his pockets, being careful to appear casual, simply chatting, asking a question out of idle curiosity.

The robot, hands joined on the desk, leaned forward.

"When were you put into service?" Benny asked it.

"It will be nine years next August third," the robot answered promptly, sitting up straighter. "And never a day of trouble. Just ordinary maintenance."

Pride, all right, Benny thought, and more than a touch that time, too.

"Good," Benny said, with what he hoped sounded like genuine enthusiasm. "And who was your tutor?" he asked, doing his best to maintain the casual tone.

The robot glanced down at its folded hands, embarrassed. "I'm sorry, sir," it said. "You know I can't tell you that. Authorized personnel only, sir. Personally, I have no objection, but it's

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just not permitted. I *am* sorry."

Personally, it has no objection, Benny thought. Personally! The only feelings and sensitivities, the only personality it has at all, for God's sake, are those that were tutored into it. Maybe even tutored into it by *me*. And if that's the case, then here *I* am refusing to answer *my* own question. Oh, the hell with it. Besides, after today....

"Right," he said brusquely. "Of course."

He turned sharply from the desk and crossed the reception room to the elevator. The doors slid open silently in front of him.

"Do have a pleasant day, sir," said the RV, its voice modulated with faintly British rhythms. It was standing beside the elevator, waiting to push the button for his floor on the control panel beside the door.

Fifteen years is too long for a tutor, he thought, as the elevator ascended. Maybe tutors should be able to retire after ten years. Maybe they should retire after ten *minutes*. Avoid the whole damn thing.

Crazy place, he muttered to himself. God help you if you stop to think too closely about some of it. Like the reception room. There's a classic study in contradictions and nonsense right there. A superexpensive general purpose model sitting at a desk using an old-fashioned typewriter to send out letters. Now, does that make sense? And why? Because the company, International Robots, International *Robots*, remember, in its infinite wisdom, thinks it's classier to have letters individually typed instead of autocopied, never mind using an ordinary vocafax. Oh, no. Old-fashioned quality and personal attention for the client, that's our motto.

That's *their* motto, he hastily corrected himself.

And the same with the RV, standing there to push a button, when all I'd have to do is say, "Six," and the elevator would go to the sixth floor. Old-fashioned service.

Old-fashioned confusion of priorities, he thought. Or just plain old-fashioned confusion.

Yeah, fifteen years is more than enough.

"Sixth floor," said the elevator, and stopped.

Benny stepped quickly out into the corridor.

"Go to hell," he growled at the elevator as the doors whispered shut.

The jellied mass of protein quivered in its transparent plastic membrane, the bright overhead lights gleaming from its shiny liquid-like surface. Nine color-coded wires ran from the soft baseball-size globe, resting in its sterile container, to a junction box in the wall of the container. There they were joined into a single shielded cable that dropped loosely to the floor, then looped upward and ended in a plug inserted into the side of a three-foot-high chromed console.

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Seated at the console, Dave Tussey studied the trembling needles on a dozen meters.

"Looks good," he murmured softly, "almost ... almost."

Behind him, Benny Benedetto lay as still as a corpse on a leatherette couch, hands joined as if in death across his stomach. Long habit kept him lying still despite the mixed feelings that tumbled through his mind.

Barely moving his lips, Benny muttered, "Hurry up, Dave."

Dave, concentrating, waiting for just the right moment, ignored the forbidden interruption.

"There," he said suddenly, and his right index finger, poised over the one white button on the panel, pressed sharply down. In its closed container, the ball of protein jelly suddenly stopped quivering and seemed to freeze solid. Dave studied it for a second, glanced back at his meters, then turned around to face Benny.

"Done!" he said, grinning broadly.

Benny's eyes fluttered open. He sighed deeply, once, then stirred and sat up stiffly on the side of the couch.

"Get these things off me," he said. He shook his head and the colored wires attached to his forehead and just behind his ears moved loosely.

"Got that one perfect," Dave said with pleasure as he sat down beside Benny. Carefully, he began working the wires loose from where they were held to Benny's head. "Another triumph for the master tutor! As he rides off into the sunset, sitting astride his mighty pension, he leaves behind yet another...."

A sour glare from Benny silenced him.

"What's the matter?" Dave said. "Feeling bad about leaving? I don't blame you. I would too. But, I'll tell you the truth, I wouldn't mind retiring myself at thirty-eight, like you. Boy! Now, there's a good deal. Poor lowly technicians like myself, we have to put in twenty years."

He removed the last wire from Benny's head.

"Are you done?" Benny asked.

"Yep. That's it. You're free as a bird now, old buddy."

Benny turned and looked at him, his face impassive. Dave, busy with the wires, did not notice. Benny watched as he finished coiling them carefully, then crossed to the console and stowed them in a compartment in its side.

"Yeah," Dave said as he straightened up, "it won't be the same around here without you, Benny. Just won't be the same. You know how it is, you get used to working with somebody, you get into your own familiar routines, you...."

"Yes, Dave. Right," Benny said, his voice barely concealing his impatience. "Right, I know what you mean." After all, he thought, Dave means well. Even if he does run off at the mouth. And even if he has driven me slowly crazy since we were teamed. So, what the

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hell, I can put up with it for another few minutes. Then it's over. For good. And good riddance to Dave and International Robots and this room and those goddamn balls of protein jelly and all the rest of it.

He looked up at Dave, who was standing in front of the console. Something about him struck Benny as odd. Of course, Benny realized. He's standing there shifting from one foot to the other. And silent. The only time Dave is ever silent is when he's monitoring my head through those meters. Look out, Benny, he sighed to himself, here it comes. He bent over and began scrabbling under the couch for his shoes.

"Listen, Benny, before you leave," Dave began and stopped.

"Umh," Benny grunted without looking up. No use encouraging him, he'll get to it without my help.

"You know, Benny, I just wanted to tell you that, uh, well, it's really been a pleasure to work with you. I mean, really. The best in the business. Best tutor I.R. ever had. Really."

"Thanks, Dave, I really appreciate it," Benny said as he pulled on his second shoe. His voice was a monotone.

"Yeah, really," Dave said. Benny knew from his voice that Dave was rapidly getting over his awkwardness and warming up to the topic, as he always did.

"The best," Dave was saying. "Really. All of I.R. is really going to miss you."

Benny stood up.

"Well, thanks a lot, Dave. I mean it. And thanks for everything you've done. Thanks for everything."

Just let me get out of here, he thought. Thanks for everything! Thanks for being part of the apparatus, like me.

He stretched out a hand toward Dave. Dave gripped it and they shook hands briefly.

"Where's your form?" Benny said.

"Right here," Dave said and reached for a clipboard on top of the console.

Hastily, Benny scrawled his signature at the bottom of the form, attesting to the fact that he had properly tutored another protein mass, another robot brain, feeding his own feelings and sensitivities into its molecules so that it would comprehend and respond to the sensibilities of a human. Other people built other capabilities into the memory and mechanisms of the robot, but the tutors, like Benny and fewer than forty others like him, were the source of all the subtleties and psychological refinements that were the hallmark of I.R.'s product.

I.R., he thought, as he slipped the pen into his pocket. Dave can think of it as I.R. He likes it here. And I never did, at least not after the first few years. But then they never used him the way they used me. He applied for a job here. Me they came looking for, in college. Me they picked out. They....

With a start, he realized that he was

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standing still, lost in the murky aura of his own thoughts. Dave was looking at him curiously. Benny thought he saw a hint of sympathy in Dave's expression.

"Well, I better get going," Benny said quickly, turning toward the door.

"Sure," Dave said. Benny detected the deliberately understanding note in his tone. I've tutored robots that can do better than that, Benny thought as he reached the door.

But his escape still had to wait. Dave's voice called him back, stopped him in the open doorway.

"You know, I'm really not supposed to tell you this," Dave said quickly, "but you have a little surprise in store. I can't tell you what it is, and I don't want to spoil the surprise, but I just thought maybe knowing that might sort of cheer you up a little. It's really a great surprise. I wish I could tell you what it is, but...."

Dave's voice trailed off and then stopped as Benny closed the door behind him.

The RV in the lobby kept its face impassive as always, as a good servant should, and silently helped Benny on with his coat. The receptionist was smiling warmly and openly. As he slipped his arms into the coat, Benny wondered fleetingly if the two of them could switch places, if the receptionist could keep its face impassive or the RV smile. He doubted it.

The RV handed him his scarf, and as he settled it in place, Benny was momentarily grateful that both robots were so well trained, or rather, so well tutored. Both seemed to sense that he did not feel like talking as he left International Robots for the last time. At least, mercifully, they were both silent.

Then there was the awkward moment when coat and scarf were both on and there was nothing left to do but leave.

Benny had sworn to himself a hundred times that when this moment finally came, he would walk out the door without so much as a backward glance. Now that the moment was at last here, he found himself, to his own confusion, looking around the reception room.

The RV stood staring into the distance at whatever it is servants study so assiduously at such moments. The receptionist straightened and restraightened some papers on its desk.

Well tutored. They were certainly that. In that respect, at least, Benny thought, they were a considerable improvement over Dave Tussey, who could be as insensitive to people as he was sensitive to his dials and meters.

Still, much to his surprise, Benny felt slightly embarrassed at having to bid his farewell to the place, such as it was, in front of the two robots. The damn things, after all, were sensitive. He had no doubt at all that they both understood perfectly well his feelings at the moment.

Or thought they did. What they

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understood, if that could even be considered the right word, was what they would *assume* he felt on such an occasion. Regret, nostalgia, a touch of loneliness, all of it mixed with a bright and promising anticipation of the future.

They were wrong.

Benny had been twenty-three when he first came here. Fresh out of graduate school, excited, honored. Selected, secretly selected, by International Robot's recruitment division, for training as a tutor.

Only the training had been more a year's worth of testing rather than training. They had never trained him to be a tutor. That, it turned out after he had been there a while, was not possible. You couldn't *train* to be a tutor.

All you could do was *be* one. Which, Benny thought, a sour taste growing in his mouth, meant being the world's most colossal zero. A nothing. And I.R.'s recruitment division scoured the nation for young people who were just right. And they had found him, he reflected, the bitterness of fresh realization taking hold of him.

His eyes refocused slowly from his unexpected reverie and settled on the receptionist. The robot, caught watching his face, looked quickly away.

Embarrassed, Benny noted with a mixture of satisfaction and repulsion.

That was what they learned from their tutors. That was the kind of thing imprinted in that quivering lump of protein jelly by tutors like himself. Human emotions, feelings, sensitivities, all the amorphous things that the technicians and engineers had not been able to *build* into them. And the lack of which had caused so many problems and accidents in the early days when personal robots had first gone on the market.

Benny shoved his hands into his coat pockets and openly studied the receptionist, suddenly not caring that it would be embarrassed, reminding himself that it was still a machine, a construct. Sure enough, he noted now with a guilty feeling of triumph, the robot showed all the signs of embarrassment. The papers on the desk were going to be a thorough mess if they got straightened out any more.

But you couldn't be a tutor if you had any clear-cut personality of your own. The thought that had nagged at him for so long now returned at full force.

And the receptionist was the living embodiment of it. No, not living, but rather a semblance of life. Like himself. That was what he had realized after so long. If you had any personality, you couldn't be a tutor. People with strong personalities, with strong likes and dislikes, capable of feeling and showing really powerful emotions, strong drives, were totally unsuited to being tutors. You had to be decent, honest, normal, just normal, no more, no less. Otherwise, the protein would pick up the stronger sensibilities from you. A good tutor, then, had to be nothing

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more nor less than a good, simple, basic, decent *zero*.

And Benny Benedetto was the best in the business. Everybody said so.

The receptionist cleared its throat.

Benny stirred and his mind came alive to the moment. He started for the door without a word.

"We'll all miss you, sir," the receptionist said hastily.

Out of the corner of his eye, Benny saw that it was smiling.

"But we'll be in touch," it added. To Benny's further surprise, it winked conspiratorially.

Get out of here, his head shouted.

Open the door.

Get out.

The damn thing winked. As if it knew a secret. A secret. Of course. The surprise Dave had been blabbing about. Receptionists always know everything that goes on in an office. Terrific, just terrific. I really need a surprise from International Robots.

Out.

Behind him, the outer door of the reception office closed with its usual solid thunk.

The weekend passed in a dizziness of colored lights and booze. At some point in it there was a sympathetic and patient bartender and somewhere else two, maybe three, bartenders who were neither sympathetic nor patient. Once there were two girls whose faces and chests swam into his vision and who giggled and talked to each other behind their hands. One place, fancier than the others, had a robot at the coatcheck, and he turned and stumbled out of there. And somewhere near the end of it there was a bench, outdoors somewhere, and a burning pain that shot in hot arrows up and down his chest, and a terrible smell. And the cold air because his overcoat had been left behind somewhere.

And, miraculously, as if he had been transported through time and space while the amber cloud befogged his brain, there was his house and his own bed and comforting hands, not human, but hands, touching him, and comforting.

And sunlight.

Sunlight, thin and cold and bright, streamed through the window as his sticky eyes came open. He stared, remembering, at the ceiling, then closed them again. Then opened them. The ceiling and the familiar room were still there.

Expecting his stomach to rebel, Benny sat up slowly, pushed the covers aside, and placed his feet on the floor. He sat unmoving on the edge of the bed, waiting to see what would happen, evaluating the functions of his body.

Nothing happened, other than a momentary dizziness.

Unfortunately, he thought, it looks like I'll live.

The movement of the bedroom door caught his eye.

"Oh, you're up, sir. Good morn-

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ing. How are you feeling?"

"I don't know yet," Benny mumbled.

The robot kept one hand on the doorknob. In the other it held a brown corduroy shirt carefully by the collar.

"I was just bringing in this shirt for you," it said. "I know it's one of your favorites and I thought you might like to have it to wear today."

"Thanks," Benny said, and a newly awakened voice in his head reminded him that you don't have to thank a robot.

"You're welcome," said the robot. "No trouble. I was very worried about you." There was a hint of a question in its tone.

"I'm all right," Benny said, answering the unasked question. "Just tired. Is...."

"I'll get breakfast while you shower and dress," the robot said. It advanced into the room and hung the shirt over the back of a chair. "Your shirt is right there for you." Then it went out, closing the door softly behind it.

"It will be strange having you home, sir," the robot said as it cleared Benny's dishes from the table. "If I may make a suggestion, perhaps for the time being I should just take care of the household according to my usual schedule. If it should bother you in any way, I can always rearrange it. Will that be all right, sir?"

"Yes," said Benny, "fine." Much to his amazement, the breakfast had somewhat cleared his mind and settled his stomach. But as the webs of sleep and hangover drifted away, a confusion of new thoughts, questions, crowded into his mind, each in turn nudging its companions aside and demanding precedence. Benny hardly knew which to try and deal with first.

He had given little thought to what he was going to do with himself now that he was retired at the age of thirty-eight. And he had given it little thought because each time it had occurred to him to wonder about it, no answers had presented themselves.

Zero.

That had, each time, been the end result of his brief self-examinations. Zero.

The brief catalogue was simple. Friends: a few, he would think, instantly correcting it to "acquaintances." And they were all married, with little interest in a single man. Hobbies: some, sort of, the thought ran, well, maybe not really hobbies, more like interests, nothing he really found.... Zero again. Ah, the hell with it.

He realized that the thought pattern was following its usual course and, with an effort, he wrenched his mind back to the present.

"Would you like more coffee?" the robot asked.

Benny's head jerked up as a sudden thought hit him with a jolt that made his stomach flop.

He was in the way. In his own house. He was disturbing the routine

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of his own home. He felt anger, resentment, hopelessness, emotions whose edges were so blurred together that it was impossible to name them individually.

The robot was standing across the table from him, hands resting lightly on the back of the other chair.

"Sit down," Benny said.

The robot pulled out the chair and sat.

"I, uh, I'm going to be home a lot from now on," Benny said.

The robot nodded its head.

"And, uh, well, I haven't given much thought to what I'll be doing and, uh...." His hands fluttered helplessly in front of him.

The robot nodded again, keeping its eyes level with his. "I understand, sir," it said.

"It'll take a little while to, well, make plans and kind of sort things out and all."

"Of course," the robot said. It glanced briefly down at its hands. "I'll be glad to help in any way I can, sir."

Benny let his thoughts drift, trying to urge them along new paths. "I may travel," he said. "There are lots of places I've always wanted to see. And now with all the time in the world...." To his dismay, he heard his own voice trailing off into silence. There was nothing he could do about it. At the moment, he couldn't think of a single place in the world that he had always wanted to see.

The robot's expression suggested that if it could have coughed, it would have. Instead, it settled for a sound meant to imitate a clearing of the throat. It was an old model, from Benny's early days at the company. Designed for domestic duty only, it lacked some of the more sophisticated systems and the newer refinements of the last dozen years.

"I hope, sir," it said slowly, eyes averted, "I hope that, whatever plans you make, I'll be able to ... go along. If that's convenient, sir."

Benny, at a loss for a response, was spared having to answer by the ringing of the front doorbell.

With a hasty "Excuse me, sir," the robot, seeming equally relieved, jumped to its feet and left the room.

Benny, feeling no curiosity about who was at the door, allowed his mind to go blank. After all, he had all the time in the world to think.

The robot returned shortly. Benny looked up.

The robot stood silent, looking at him with an expression that Benny could not remember ever seeing on its face before. He tried to decipher it but could not and gave up the attempt.

"Who is it?" he asked.

In the expressionless monotone that was standard equipment on the simplest and cheapest robots, it answered, "It's a robot, sir. From International Robots. It has a message for you, sir."

* * *

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The new robot was standing just inside the door where it had been told to wait. Benny saw immediately that it was one of the newest, most expensive, models. And at first glance it seemed to have the full array of optional extras, even including the deluxe uniform, exterior details that suggested it also had the most sophisticated capabilities. It looked back idly at him, waiting for him to speak.

"Yes?" Benny said.

"I have a message for you," the robot answered.

"Well, what is it?"

With what could only be described as a sigh, the robot reached into a pocket and extracted an envelope.

"Here," it said casually.

Benny accepted the envelope and, as he opened it, felt the old familiar tightening of the throat that had afflicted him every morning as he approached the International Robots building. With stiff fingers, he pulled out a folded letter.

"Dear Mr. Benedetto," he read. "The robot that brings you this letter is a gift for you from International Robots. It is, you will already be aware, our finest model. Please accept it as a token of our appreciation. It is our hope that it will serve you as well as you have served the company. Best wishes for your continued happiness." The letter was signed, "Richard V. Castle, President." Benny had, in fifteen years at International Robots, never met Richard V. Castle, President.

Benny looked up into the robot's face. Its eyes, unblinking, met his. It waited.

Finally Benny spoke. "So you're a gift," he said, realizing as he said it that the words were superfluous.

Why, a voice, the voice that was now growing so familiar, cried in his head, why are you so uncomfortable with robots? Except, of course, for First, that's been in the house for years. Why? Is it because you, better than most men, know their origins, their sources, their possibilities? Why? What is there about them that makes you so uneasy?

The robot nodded its head slightly. Benny wondered if that could be a hint of a smile on its face.

Pulling himself together with a deep breath, he walked slowly around the robot, making a great show of looking it over appraisingly. As he glanced across its shoulder, he saw First staring blankly into space, its gaze seeming unfocused. Something about its posture and the tilt of its head reminded Benny of the RV in the reception office. That was it. It looked as if it would have sniffed disapprovingly if it had known how.

Benny completed his inspection and came back to stand beside First. He opened his mouth to speak, closed it, then turned toward the door. "First," he said over his shoulder, "bring it out here." He didn't know what, but something had kept him from addressing the robot directly.

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In the kitchen, Benny sat down at the table as the two robots followed him into the room.

"I think...."

"I'll get more coffee, sir," First said quietly.

The new robot stood silently at the other side of the table.

"So you're a gift," Benny said again. "Well. How about that." He could hear the flatness in his own voice. "What can you do?"

The robot stirred and seemed to come awake.

"Whatever needs to be done," it said.

Benny's confused embarrassment suddenly boiled up, close to anger.

"Look," he said steadily, controlling his voice, "we're not playing guessing games. What capacities do you have?"

The robot blinked once. "All of them," it said. There was a fractional hesitation before it added, "Sir." It looked as if it wanted to fold its arms but didn't know how. "I'm equipped with every option the company offers. I'm the company's gift to you, sir, in appreciation for your fifteen years of service. I was ... specially designed for you." It smiled, a smile like a dark shadow, a strange, somehow incomplete imitation of a genuine human smile.

"Here's your coffee," First said and placed the steaming cup in front of him on the table. "I fixed it for you."

"Thanks," Benny muttered and immediately felt embarrassed at thanking First in front of....

"Do you have a name?" he said.

"No, sir," the robot answered. "You can give me any name you like."

Benny sipped his coffee slowly, trying to think.

"I might suggest," the robot said thoughtfully, as if choosing its words with care, "if you have no preference yourself, a name that might suit."

"And what is that?" Benny asked, suddenly feeling all the tiredness of the exhausting weekend flooding through his body again.

The robot glanced past him at First.

"Last," it said. "As in: last of a line."

Benny saw the same furtive shadow of a smile flicker across the robot's face. He looked away quickly.

"Fine," he said, trying to keep the swelling discomfort he felt out of his voice. "Fine. From now on, that's your name. Now go and familiarize yourself with the house."

"Sure," said Last. A ghost of a shrug moved its shoulders as it turned to the door and went out.

Benny stared at its back through the doorway.

Behind him, First dropped a plastic cup. It bounced and rattled, then skidded across the floor and came to rest against Benny's ankle.

With a sigh of total exhaustion, Benny rested his head on his hands and stared into the thin column of steam rising from his cup.

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* * *

Two hours of walking in the crisp March air made him feel better physically, but Benny returned home still with no ideas on how to pass the time, what to do now in his glorious retirement.

As he strolled slowly up the path to his house, he reflected idly that at least he had no money worries. Nothing to worry about there. International Robots, no matter what else you could say about them, at least took care of their own. They had never been stingy that way. Nothing but the best. The house, the money in the bank, the pension that would last him the rest of his life, all of it. And now, as a parting gift, the new robot.

That's a mixed blessing, he thought, as he hesitated on the porch. Nobody in his right mind would turn down a deluxe model like that when it comes without a price tag. But Benny wanted nothing to do anymore with International Robots. Or with robots in general, for that matter.

Except, of course, for First. He had had First for years now and was used to having it around. And First knew and could anticipate most of his thoughts and needs. Hell of a thing to have to rely on a robot for everything, but when you're all alone....

He dug in his pocket for his key and found that he had left the house without it.

Now there's Last. For what it's worth. If this is the pride of the company's line, maybe the planners and designers should go back to the old drawing board. This one looks like it needs adjustments already. Besides, I really have no use for it. All it'll do is clutter up the house and get in First's way.

First. That silly, uninventive name. Typical of me back then, when I thought I was going to collect a dozen of them. But you get used to a name. After a while, you don't even think about it. And First had been in the house for so long. Benny realized that it had never even occurred to him to sell or junk First, outdated as it was. You get used to things.

The door suddenly swung open and First held it wide for him to enter.

Benny went in without asking First how it had known he was standing there without his key. He was long accustomed to First doing things like that.

"Chilly out, sir. You should have worn a hat," First said.

Benny put it off all afternoon, but finally, for lack of anything better to do, he called Last into the living room. The book he had been trying unsuccessfully to read lay discarded on the couch beside him.

As soon as Last was standing in front of him, Benny realized that, to his own discomfort, he had made a tactical error, ridiculous as that seemed. He immediately saw the difficulty of appearing forceful while looking up in-

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to another's face. Even if the other was a robot. And he swore silently at himself for feeling this way at all. Yet there was something about Last that disturbed him, something he didn't like.

"Have you familiarized yourself with the whole house?" he asked.

"I think so," Last said.

Benny had never heard a robot answer a direct question that way. A robot either did or did not know something, but it certainly would know for sure which was the case.

Benny, feeling his exasperation growing as it had earlier, crossed one leg over the other and leaned back casually into the couch.

"What does that mean?" he said, his voice level.

The robot's shoulders moved in a slight shrug. "I've seen the house," it said indifferently. "I can find my way around."

"That's not what I...."

Gratefully, Benny saw First come in from the kitchen and stand silently just inside the door. It took in the scene at a glance, its gaze lingering for a second on Last, then looked at Benny, as if waiting for a chance to speak.

"First, have you shown Last where everything is?" Benny said.

First approached but carefully kept its distance from Last.

"I ... did, sir," First said slowly. It looked inquiringly at Benny, who got the distinct feeling that First wanted to be told to continue.

"Go on," Benny said.

First, although it was equipped with only a limited range of reactions and facial expressions, managed to look alternately relieved and uneasy. It glanced nervously at Last.

"I showed it...." First here did its poor imitation of a clearing of the throat, in substitute for the cough it could not produce. "I showed it most of the house, sir, but it seems" — First groped for the right word — "uninterested, sir. It doesn't seem to retain the information, sir. If I may say so." It stopped, uncertain whether to continue.

"Go on," Benny said, gaining courage to deal with the problem from the chance that the problem might solve itself. "Go ahead," he said. "I want a full report on Last's performance this afternoon. Is it in working order?"

First seemed emboldened and stood a little straighter.

"It seems to be in working order, sir. But I think some extensive adjustments are required. As far as I can determine, it doesn't retain information for more than a few seconds. Perhaps the memory circuits are faulty. It could be just a matter of a small tuning being required. I did attempt to familiarize it with the kitchen, sir. It showed no aptitude at all, sir, none."

First finished and then searched Benny's face, as if it sought reassurance that it hadn't gone too far and stepped out of line.

"You did very well to test it out," Benny said, and First visibly relaxed.

"Now," he said, turning to Last,

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"have you done a routine self-check to determine where the problem is? What did you find?"

To Benny's surprise and, he had to admit, his pleasure, Last was the one who now looked uncomfortable. It was clearly capable of a much wider range of much more subtle expressions than First. Benny noted a look of sullen resentment cross its face, and he wondered in amazement where it had learned *that*. Then it turned its head and looked at First with open contempt which changed gradually into boredom as it moved its gaze to Benny.

It tossed its head disdainfully in First's direction. "This machine here has shown me whatever there is to see in the house. I really don't require extensive training. And most of what it was telling me had nothing to do with the actual operations of the house. My impression is that this model is hopelessly old-fashioned and should be scrapped for whatever you can get."

Benny stared up at the robot, his mouth open in astonishment. First too was looking sideways at it, its eyes wide. Benny jumped when First finally spoke, shattering the tableau.

"Would you like me to put it away for now, sir? It's too late to call the service department today."

"Yes," Benny said quickly. "Last, go to the cellar. Stand off someplace where you won't be in the way. Deactivate and wait there. First, go with it and see that it does it properly." Thank God for First, he thought.

First moved off toward the door. "This way," it said peremptorily, turning a cold glare on Last.

With a tone and look of open scorn and distaste that Benny had never experienced even in a human, and that sent a cold shiver across the back of his neck, Last said, "As you well know, I have no choice but to obey." Then it turned its back on him and walked with deliberate slowness toward the door where First stood waiting. In the doorway, it stopped and turned back to face Benny. It opened its mouth as if to speak, then closed it again. Instead, it shrugged and simply turned away. First followed it out of the room.

Light snow was falling as Benny threw the front door open. A thin coating of white powder, looking quite dry, was beginning to soften the outlines of shapes in the evening. The sky had the reddish color of a snowy night.

A few flakes of snow drifted lazily under the roof of the porch. Benny, breathing heavily, his heart hammering at the walls of his chest, concentrated on watching them, trying to convince himself that nothing had changed, that the world and he himself were still the same.

But he knew that somehow things were not the same. He tried, standing in the doorway and feeling the cold air licking at him, to follow the thought backward to its origin and forward to its conclusion, but he could make no sense of it.

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His knees were trembling but he knew without thinking that it wasn't the cold. He shivered violently, teeth chattering, but would not go back into the house. Instead, he moved forward and sat down heavily on the steps of the porch. Elbows on knees, he leaned forward. A few flakes of snow landed on his shoes.

There was a sound behind him, a step on the wood floor of the porch. "Oh..." he heard First say, then the steps retreated into the house. Benny did not look up.

After a moment, the steps returned and he was aware of First's legs standing beside him. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he caught the movement of something soft and dark swinging near his head.

"You better put this on," First said, holding the sweater out toward him. "It's very cold."

Swallowing the sudden inexplicable lump in his throat, Benny reached out for the sweater and wordlessly pulled it on. It made him feel warmer immediately.

He lifted his head and looked out through the silently dropping snow. When he was sure of his voice, he said, "Sit down, First."

The robot came down the three steps to the path, half turned around to look at the steps, then turned its back on him and slowly lowered itself to the level of the porch floor. With a start, Benny realized that the robot, which seldom sat even in a chair, had never at all sat on steps, which required a different sitting procedure.

For some reason he could not grasp, the robot's momentary awkwardness struck him forcefully and the lump leaped back into Benny's throat. Purposefully, by repeated swallowing, he fought it back down.

When his throat felt clear again, he spoke softly, a wisp of vapor floating from his mouth into the crystalline air. "I know this is probably beyond your capacity, First, but I don't know why this business has me so upset. It doesn't make any sense. But it's more than that, it's...." He waved a hand helplessly and looked down at his shoes.

Beside him, the robot stirred uncomfortably. A board in the floor of the porch creaked.

In a voice as soft as Benny's own, First said, "If you'd prefer, sir, I'll send...."

"I just don't get it," Benny said, not hearing the robot's words. "It's beyond me. It really is." He shook his head.

Neither said anything for a moment, then the robot broke the silence. "You should go inside," it said firmly, "it's getting very cold out here."

"First!"

Benny was awake and screaming before he was even aware what he was doing. Dream and reality blurred together, and suddenly he was standing in the middle of the living room, screaming in the dark.

First.!"

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He spun around, panting, eyes straining to pierce the darkness.

"Here, sir," he heard First saying. Something crashed and broke close by. "Right here."

The robot's shape loomed close to him out of the darkness. Benny clutched at the arm, groping for support. The robot's other arm came up and held his shoulder to steady him.

Benny stood, breathing heavily, until the pounding of his heart and the nightmare fright receded from him.

"Why ... how did I get dressed?" Benny gasped.

"You fell asleep on the couch," the robot said steadily. "I thought it would be best just to leave you and let you sleep. You were very tired."

"Oh," Benny said. "I ... I was dreaming...." His voice faltered. "Outside. I'm going outside, on the porch. I need some fresh air."

The snow was still falling, heavier now, in thick shifting white clouds that swept across the open space of the lawn. Snowflakes whirled at Benny's face as he opened the door. A gust of cold wind hit him in the chest, but he gratefully inhaled the chilly air.

The robot said nothing about the cold.

"Did you take care of that?" Benny said. A hint of a shiver, whether from the cold or something else, made his voice quaver.

"Yes, sir," the robot said, "I took care of it."

"It's deactivated?"

"Yes."

"Did you ... look at it at all?"

"Briefly, sir."

"Badly adjusted?" Benny said quietly.

There was a long pause before the robot answered. "After it deactivated, I took a brief look into its control center."

Benny stepped forward and sat down on the steps. A snowflake landed on one of his eyelashes and he blinked it away.

"What did you find?" he said.

He waited but the robot did not respond.

"What did you find?" Benny said again.

Instead of answering, the robot came down the steps, hesitated, then sat down beside him.

"It appeared quite normal, sir," it said. "Mechanically."

Benny, struggling to phrase the question carefully, for the robot's sake as well as his own, spoke very slowly. "Could you tell anything else from what you saw?"

In a voice that matched his own, the robot said, "I saw the code numbers, sir."

"Could you tell anything from them?"

"I ... don't have enough knowledge to interpret them with complete accuracy. I couldn't be certain of what the codes mean."

"First?"

"Yes, sir?"

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"Why did it call itself Last?" Benny's voice was barely audible.

Another long silence hung in the air and floated around their heads with the snowflakes.

First leaned forward and tentatively placed its elbows on its knees, imitating Benny's position.

Benny continued to stare at the snow-covered lawn.

The robot's answer, when it finally came, had a low metallic hum in it. "I wouldn't know about anything like that, sir. Beyond my capacities."

"And you're programmed to speak only the truth at all times, isn't that right?"

"Yes, sir," First said, its voice regaining some of its strength. "Subject, of course, to good judgment, as tutored into me."

"Of course," Benny said, his voice wavering again.

"Of course," echoed the robot.

"And you'll...."

"I'll send it back first thing in the morning, sir. Before you're awake. You won't have to deal with it at all."

Benny watched the snowflakes drifting down onto the lawn.

"First," he said, "how do you always manage to know what I'm thinking?"

"I had a good tutor," the robot said.

Benny lifted his head and let his gaze sweep slowly across the white lawn. After a while, he said, "Pretty isn't it?"

"Yes," said the robot.

"First?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," said the robot, and turned to watch the snowflakes.

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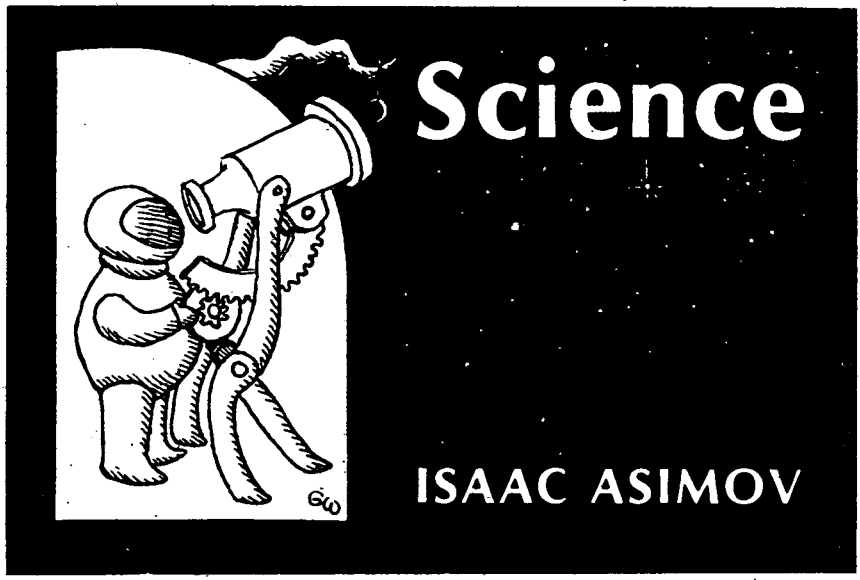

CLONE, CLONE OF MY OWN

On December 12, 1968, I gave a talk to a meeting of doctors and lawyers in San José, California.* Naturally, I was asked to speak on some subject that would interest both groups. Some instinct told me that medical malpractice suits might interest both but would nevertheless not be a useful topic. I spoke on genetic engineering instead, therefore, and, toward the end, discussed the matter of cloning.

In the audience was my good friend of three decades — the well-known science fiction writer, bon vivant, and wit, Randall Garrett. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a piece of paper placed on the podium as I talked about cloning. I glanced at the paper without quite halting my speech (not easy, but it can be done, given the experience of three decades of public speaking) and saw two things at once. First, it was one of Randall's superlative pieces of satiric verse, and second, it was clearly intended to be sung to the tune of "Home on the Range."

**Those of my Gentle Readers who know that under no circumstances will I take a plane need not register shock. I travelled to California and back by train. Yes, they still run.*

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Needed to understand the verse is merely the fact that, genetically, the distinction between human male and female is that every male cell has an X- and a Y-chromosome and that every female cell has two X-chromosomes.* Therefore, if, at the moment of conception or shortly thereafter, a Y-chromosome can somehow be changed to an X-chromosome, a male will *ipso facto* be changed into a female.

Here, then, is Randall's Song, to which I took the liberty of adding a verse myself:

(1st verse)
O, give me a clone
Of my own flesh and bone
With its Y-chromosome changed to X;
And when it is grown
Then my own little clone
Will be of the opposite sex.

(chorus)
Clone, clone of my own,
With its Y-chromosome changed to X;
And when I'm alone
With my own little clone
We will both think of nothing but sex.

(2nd verse)
Oh, give me a clone,
Hear my sorrowful moan,
Just a clone that is wholly my own;
And if it's an X
Of the feminine sex
O, what fun we will have when we're prone.

When I was through with my talk and with the question-and-answer session, I sang Randall's Song in my most resonant baritone and absolutely brought the house down.

Three and a half weeks later I sang it again at the annual banquet of the Baker Street Irregulars, that fine group of Sherlock Holmes fanciers, adjusting it slightly to its new task (*O, give me some clones / Of the great Sherlock Holmes / With their Y-chromosomes* —) and brought the house down again.

But you may, by now, be asking yourself, "What's a clone?"

It's been in the news a great deal lately, but recognizing a word, and knowing what it represents can be two different things. So let's go into the matter—

* * *

*See COUNTING CHROMOSOMES, F&SF, June, 1968.

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The word "clone" is Greek, exactly as it stands, provided you spell it in Greek letters, and it means "twig."

A clone is any organism or group of organisms that arises out of a cell or group of cells by means other than sexual reproduction. Put it another way, it is an organism that is the product of asexual reproduction. Put it still another way, it is an organism with a single parent, whereas an organism that arises from sexual reproduction (except where self-fertilization is possible) has two parents.

Asexual reproduction is a matter of course among one-celled organisms (though sexual reproduction can also take place), and it is also very common in the plant world.

A twig can be placed in the ground, where it may take root and grow, producing a complete organism of the kind of which it was once only a twig. Or the twig can be grafted to the branch of another tree (of a different variety even) where it can grow and flourish. In either case, it is an organism with a single parent, and sex has had nothing to do with its making. It is, probably, because human beings first encountered this asexual form of reproduction in connection with fruit-trees that such a one-parent organism of non-sexual origin is called a "twig," that is, "clone."

And what of multicellular animals?

Asexual reproduction can take place among them as well. The more primitive the animal — that is, the less diversified and specialized its cells are — the more likely it is that asexual reproduction can take place.

A sponge, or a fresh-water hydra, or a flatworm, or a starfish, can, any of them, be torn into parts, and these parts, if kept in their usual environment, will each grow into a complete organism. The new organisms are clones.

Even organisms as complex as insects can in some cases give birth to parthenogenetic young, and, in the case of aphids, for instance, do so as a matter of course. In these cases, an egg cell, containing only a half-set of chromosomes, does not require union with a sperm cell to supply the other half-set. Instead, the egg cell's half-set merely duplicates itself, producing a full set, all from the female parent, and the egg then proceeds to divide and become an independent organism, again a kind of clone.

In general, though, complex animals and, in particular, vertebrates, do not clone but engage in sexual reproduction exclusively.

Why? — Two reasons.

In the first place, as an organism becomes more complex and specialized, its organs, tissues and cells become more complex and specialized as well. The

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cells are so well adapted to perform their highly specialized functions that they can no longer divide and differentiate as the original egg cells did.*

This seems a terrible disadvantage. Organisms that can clone, reproducing themselves asexually, would seem to be much better off than other organisms — who must go to the trouble of finding partners and who must engage in all the complex phenomena, both physical and chemical, involved in sexual reproduction. Think of all the humans beings who, for one slight flaw or another, can't have children — a problem that would be unknown if we could just release a toe and have it grow into another individual while we grew another toe.

Here comes the second reason, then. There's an evolutionary advantage to sexual reproduction that more than makes up for all the inconveniences.** In cloning, the genetic contents of new organisms remain identical with those of the original organisms, except for occasional mutations. If the organism is very efficiently adapted to its surroundings, this is useful, but it is an extremely conservative mechanism that reduces the chance of change. Any alteration in the environment could quickly lead to the extinction of a species.

In the case of sexual reproduction, every new organism has a brand-new mix of genes, half from one parent, half from another. Change is inevitable, variation from individual to individual is certain. A species in which sexual reproduction is the norm has the capacity to adapt readily to slight alterations in environment since some of its variants are then favored over others. Indeed, a species can, through sexual reproduction, split with relative ease into two or more species that will take advantage of somewhat different niches in the environment.

In short, a sexually-reproducing species evolves much more quickly than a cloning species, and such difficult-to-evolve specializations as intelligence are not likely to arise in the entire lifetime of a habitable planet without sexual reproduction.

* * *

**This is not mysterious. We see an analogy on the social plane. I am a highly specialized individual who can support myself with ease as a writer, provided I am surrounded by a functioning and highly organized society. Place me on a desert island and I shall quickly perish, since I don't know the first thing about the simplest requirements for self-support.*

***Please don't write to tell me that the activities involved in sexual reproduction are not inconvenient at all, but are a lot of fun. I know that better than you do, whoever you are. The fun is an evolutionarily-developed bribe designed to have us overlook and forgive the inconveniences. If you are a woman, you will see the point more quickly, perhaps, than a man will.*

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Yet in one specialized way cloning can take place in even the most advanced animals — even in the human being.

Consider a human egg cell, fertilized by a human sperm cell. We now have a fertilized egg cell which contains a half-set of genes from its mother and a half-set from its father.

This fertilized egg cell cannot become an independently living organism for some nine months, for it must divide and redivide within the mother's womb and be nourished by way of its mother's blood-stream. It must develop, specialize and grow larger until it has developed the necessary ability to live independently. Even after it emerges from its mother's womb, it requires constant and unremitting care for a period of time before it can be trusted to care for itself.

Nevertheless, the matter of necessary care is genetically irrelevant. The fertilized egg is already a separate organism with its genetic characteristics fixed and unique.

The first step in the development of the fertilized egg is that it divides into two cells, which cling together. Each of these two cells divides again, and each of the four that results divides again and so on.

If, after the first cell division, the two offspring cells, for any reason, should happen to fall apart, each offspring cell may then go on to develop into a complete organism of its own. The result is a pair of identical twins, each with the same genetic equipment and each of the same sex, of course. In a sense, each twin is a clone of the other.

There is no reason to suppose that this separation of offspring cells can't happen over and over, so that three or four or any number of organisms might not develop from the original fertilized egg. As a matter of practical fact, however, a mother's womb can only hold so much, and if there are multiple organisms developing, each is sure to be smaller than a single organism. The more organisms that develop, the smaller each one, and, in the end, they will be too small to survive after delivery.

There are such things as identical triplets and quadruplets, but I doubt that any higher number of infants would survive long after birth without the advantages of modern medical technique. Even then it is hard enough.

Identical twins are very like each other and often display mirror-image characteristics. (I once had a chemistry professor with his nose canted to the left. His identical-twin brother had his nose canted to the right, I was told.)

It is also possible, though not usual, for a woman to bring two different egg cells to fruition at the same time. If both are fertilized, two children will be born who are each possessed of genetic equipment different from the other.

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What results are "fraternal twins," which need not be of the same sex and which need not resemble each other any more than siblings usually do.

Consider the fertilized egg again. Every time it divides and redivides, the new cells that form inherit the same genetic equipment possessed by the original fertilized egg.

Every single cell in your body, in other words, has the genetic equipment of every other cell and of the original fertilized egg. Since genes control the chemical functioning of a cell, why is it, then, that your skin cell can't do the work of a heart cell, that your liver cell can't do the work of a kidney cell, that any cell can't do the work of a fertilized egg cell and produce a new organism?

The answer is that though all the genes are there in every cell of your body, they aren't all working alike. The cell is an intricate assemblage of chemical reactions, chemical building blocks, chemical products, and physical structures, all of which influence one another. Some genes are inhibited, some are stimulated, in a variety of ways depending on subtle factors, with the result that different cells in your body have genetic equipment in which only characteristic parts are working at characteristic rates.

Such specialized development begins in the earliest embryo, as some cells come into being on the outside of the embryo, some on the inside, some with more of the original yolk, some with less, some with first chance at absorbing nutrients from the maternal blood-stream, some with only a later chance. The details are clearly of the greatest importance to human biology, and biologists just don't yet know them.

Naturally, the ordinary "somatic cells" of an adult human body, with their genetic equipment working only in highly specialized ways, cannot divide into a whole organism if left to themselves. Many body cells, such as those of the muscles or nerves have become so specialized they can't divide at all. Only the sex cells, eggs and sperm, retain the lack of genetic specialization required to produce a new organism under the proper circumstances.

Is there any way of unspecializing the genetic structure of somatic cells so as to allow them to develop into a new organism?

Well, the genes are contained in the nucleus of the cell, which makes up a small portion of the total and is marked off by a membrane of its own. Outside the nucleus is the cytoplasm of a cell, and it is the material in the cytoplasm that provides the various chemicals that help serve to inhibit or stimulate the action of the genes.

Suppose, then, the nucleus of a somatic cell were surrounded with the cytoplasm of an egg cell. Would the genetic equipment in the nucleus unblock,

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and would the egg cell then proceed to divide and redivide? Would it go on to form an individual with the genetic equipment of the original somatic cell, and therefore of the person from whom the somatic cell was taken? If so, the new organism would be a clone of the person who donated the somatic cell.

The technique has been tried on different animals. You begin with an unfertilized egg cell and treat it in such a way as to remove its nucleus, either by delicately cutting it out or by using some chemical process. In the place of the removed egg cell nucleus, you insert the nucleus of a somatic cell of the same (or, possibly, an allied) species, and then let nature take its course.

This has been successfully tried with animals as complex as a tadpole.

It stops being easy after the frog, though. Frog eggs are naked and can be manipulated easily. They develop in water and can just lie there after the micro-operation.

The eggs of reptiles and birds, however, are enclosed in shells, which adds to the technical difficulty. The eggs of mammals are very small, very delicate, very easily damaged. Furthermore, even if a mammalian egg has had its nucleus replaced, it would then have to be implanted into the womb of a female and allowed to come to term there.

The practical problems of mammalian cloning are such that there is no chance of it happening for some time yet. Yet biologists are anxious to perform the feat and are trying hard. Eventually, they will no doubt succeed. What purpose will it serve?

If clones can be reproduced wholesale, a biologist can have a whole group of animals with identical genetic equipment, a set of ten thousand identical-twin mice, let us say. There are many animal experiments that can be conducted with the hope of more useful results if the question of genetic variation could be eliminated.

By the addition of other genetic-engineering techniques, it might be possible to produce a whole series of animals with identical genetic equipment, except that in each case, one gene is removed or altered — a different gene in each individual perhaps. The science of genetics would then advance in seven-league strides.

There would be practical uses, too. A prize bull, or a champion egg-laying hen, could be cloned and the genetic characteristics that make the record-breaking aspects of the animal possible would be preserved without the chance of diminution by the interplay of genes obtained from a second parent.

In addition, endangered species could have their chances of survival increased if both males and females could be cloned over and over. When the

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number of individuals was sufficiently increased, sexual reproduction could be allowed to take over.

We might even dream of finding a frozen mammoth with some cell nuclei not entirely dead. We might then clone one by way of an elephant's womb. If we could find a male and a female mammoth —

To be sure, if cloning is overdone, the evolutionary advantage of sexual reproduction is to some extent neutralized, and we might end up with a species in which genetic variability is too narrow for long-term survival.

It is important to remember that the most important genetic possession of any species is not this gene or that, *but the whole mixed bag*. The greater the variety of genes available to a species, the more secure it is against the viscissitudes of fortune. The existence of congenital disorders and gene deficiencies is the price paid for the advantage of variety and versatility.

And what about cloned human beings, which is, after all, the subject matter of Randall's Song.

These may never be as important as you think. The prospect of importance rests chiefly on certain misapprehensions on the part of the public. Some people, for instance, pant for clones because they think them the gateway to personal immortality. That is quite wrong.

Your clone is not *you*. Your clone is your twin brother (or sister) and is no more you than your ordinary identical-twin would be. Your clone does not have your consciousness, and if *you* die, you are *dead*. You do not live on in your clone. Once that is understood, I suspect that much of the interest in clones will disappear.

Some people fear clones, on the other hand, because they imagine that morons will be cloned in order to make it possible to build up a great army of cannon-fodder that despots will use for world conquest.

Why bother? There has never been any difficulty in finding cannon-fodder anywhere in the world, even without cloning, and the ordinary process of supplying new soldiers for despots is infinitely cheaper than cloning.

More reasonably, it could be argued that the clone of a great human being would retain his genetic equipment and would therefore be another great human being of the same kind. In that case, the chief use of cloning would be to reproduce genius.

That, I think, would be a waste of time. We are not necessarily going to breed thousands of transcendent geniuses out of an Einstein, or thousands of diabolical villains out of a Hitler.

After all, a human being is more than his genes. Your clone is the result of

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your nucleus being placed into a foreign egg cell, and the foreign cytoplasm in that egg cell will surely have an effect on the development of the clone. The egg will have to be implanted into a foreign womb and that, too, will have an influence on the development of the organism.

Even if a woman were to have one of her somatic nuclei implanted into one of her own egg cells and if she were then to have the egg cell implanted into the womb of her own mother (who, we will assume, is still capable of bearing a child), the new organism will be born into different circumstances and that would have an effect on its personality, too.

For instance, suppose you wanted one hundred Isaac Asimovs so that the supply of F&SF essays would never run out. You would then have to ask what it was that made me the kind of writer I am — or a writer at all. Was it only my genes?

I was brought up in a candy store under a father of the old school who, although he was Jewish, was the living embodiment of the Protestant ethic. My nose was kept to the grindstone until I could no longer remove it. Furthermore, I was brought up during the Great Depression and had to find a way of making a living — or I would inherit the candy store, which I desperately didn't want to do. Furthermore, I lived in a time when science fiction magazines, and pulp magazines generally, were going strong, and when a young man could sell clumsily written stories because the demand was greater than the supply.

Put it all together, they spell M-E.

The Isaac Asimov clones, once they grew up, simply won't live in the same social environment I did, won't be subjected to the same pressures, won't have the same opportunities. What's more, when I wrote, I just wrote — no one expected anything particular from me. When my clones write, their products will always be compared to the Grand Original and that would discourage and wipe out anyone.

The end result will be that though my clones, or some of them, might turn out to be valuable citizens of one kind or another, it would be very unlikely that any one of them would be another Isaac Asimov, and their production would not be worth-while. Whatever good they might do would not be worth the reduction they would represent in the total gene-variability of humanity.

Yet cloning would not be totally useless, either. There would be the purely theoretical advantage of studying the development of embryos with known variations in their genes which, except for those variations, would have identical genetic equipment. (This would raise serious ethical questions, as all

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human experimentation does, but that is not the issue at the moment.)

Then, too, suppose it were possible to learn enough about human embryonic development to guide embryos into all sorts of specialized by-paths that would produce a kind of monster that had a full-sized heart with all else vestigial; or a full-sized kidney, or lung, or liver, or leg. With just one organ developing, techniques of forced growth (in the laboratory, of course, and not in a human womb) might make development to full size a matter of months only.

We can therefore imagine that at birth, every human individual will have scrapings taken from his little toe, thus attaining a few hundred living cells that can be at once frozen for possible eventual use. (This is done at birth, because the younger the cell, the more efficiently it is likely to clone.)

These cells could serve as potential organ banks for the future. If the time were to come when an adult found he had a limping heart, or fading pancreas, or whatever; or if a leg had been lost in an accident or had had to be amputated, then those long-frozen cells would be defrosted and put into action.

An organ replacement would be grown, and since it would have precisely the same genetic equipment as the old, the body would not reject it. Surely that is the best possible application of cloning.

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This is Michael Shea's first story for F&SF, and it is something special, a striking blend of science fiction and horror with a distinctive and absolutely gripping narrative. The author says that he is 32, L.A. born, Berkeley educated and the author of a 1974 DAW novel A QUEST FOR SIMBILIS, which won second place in the 1974 August Derleth Fantasy Award, given by the British Fantasy Society.

The Angel of Death

BY

MICHAEL SHEA

A young man named Engelmann, out late one night, entered a phone booth and pretended to search for a number in the book. He savored the booth's little island of light, and his own prominence in it, like a lone, glass-cased museum exhibit on the dim street.

Displaying himself thus made him grin with irony, for he knew his rarity and power would not be perceived by anyone who passed. Here, O street, was the man the city lived in fear of! His very shape and substance! Behold, and fail to see! He lifted the receiver, deposited a dime, dialed a local prefix and then, randomly, four more digits.

He got an old man's voice. "Who is it?" A little angry-edgy, as if to an unexpected knocker outside his door. There was a TV on in the background.

"Hello, sir," Engelmann cried, hearty as an emcee. "I'm glad you tuned in, sir, because, once again, it's Angel of Death time!"

A pause. Just enough to show the name had struck, registered. "What? Is this some radio call? I never listen to the radio."

"No, sir! This is a *hot tip*. I'm letting you and only you know that it's Angel of Death time, brought to you by that ol' Guy in the Sky, the Angel of Death himself, *myself*!"

Now the pause echoed unmistakably with the old man's awareness. "Who is this? Who are you calling?"

"But I'm calling you! And I know you're ecstatic, 'cause only I can satisfy, right? Only I can make 'em die!"

"You're crazy! Who do you want? Leave me alone!"

Engelmann positively shimmied with contained laughter, for the old man didn't hang up! He waited, as if for the reply of Death itself. He waited

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to argue for mercy, for exemption, as if Engelmann hovered somewhere above his roof and clutched his very fate in angelic talons.

"Oh, but, sir—*you're* not my Mystery Guest tonight. I'm just calling to *tell* you. You must know about me — how I go lightfoot, smoother than smoke, or growl along in my powerful car. I'm that devilish, cleverish, feverish Angel of Death, that snooper and swooper and brain-outscooper. This is a *tip*, sir! I picked you out of the air! Take this down."

The old voice came back, half begging, half barking: "You shouldn't be bothering people that don't do you any harm! Is this a joke?"

"Now just take this down, sir. It's a *tip*. You can send it to Mr. Scheisskiss who writes the column. Ready? This is it:

> Those sniggering bitches
> Out scratching their itches,
> Those nudgers and rubbers,
> I shatter their skulls to spatters
> and tatters!
> I just slug them into jumbled red
> matter!"

Engelmann hung up crisply and left the booth. He strolled back the way he had come. His body was plump and tall, and he moved with a kind of stately drift—a secret pomp. He was a visiting potentate, again at large in the Cosmos. Tonight, in fact, he was stepping down from his Citadel and into the city's Time and Space, for the eighth time.

During his intervals up in his eyrie (where he lay in timeless power, watching TV) he was also down here among men, of course. Their unflagging vigilance and dread enshrined him everywhere, night after night. He was a Presence here even between those times when he chose, according to the long, sweet, tidal shiftings of his will, to descend in the flesh.

And now, for the eighth time, he had descended, and moved among men. Even unto his angelic car he moved, and entered it, and woke the vigor of its engines.

At this point a remarkable coincidence — the first, in fact, of a series — occurred. At the very hour of the Angel's descent into the space and time of mankind, another transcendent individual made a similar entry. That is to say, he plunged from space into the warm, rich atmosphere of earth.

It wasn't only the timing which made this remarkable. For as the newly arrived entity braked his plunge and extruded an umbrella of rigid cilia so that his sphericity, hanging beneath, began to drift smoothly like a giant thistledown — as he performed these adjustments, he immediately initiated a sensor-probe of relative psychic concentrations throughout the biosphere. And in doing this he quickly identified as his nearest promising target a huge

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concatenation of vitalities which was none other than the city through which Engelmann then moved.

Engelmann was driving at that moment, gliding down lamplit corridors of parked cars. Humorously, he had chosen a street that was just on the margin of what the press generally designated as his "territory." As he drifted past, his eyes ransacked the cars, front seats and back. Eerie emptiness! Nine months before, a street like this would have offered a dozen pairs of greedy mammals, hutching up, for here was the only escape for the ache of young blood in the crowded apartments everywhere. And it had been he, Engelmann, who, like a scouring wind, had cleansed these streets.

But there was something here. He sensed it. He almost felt the secret rocking, the muffled titter aimed precisely at himself, a snigger of triumph at duping the Angel of Death. He turned and came back down the block. There was a van ahead which, just perceptibly, had moved, or had it? As he passed, his senses crowded up to it, embraced it, passionate for any faint clue of hot, hidden grapplings. And, by his fierce angelic eyes, it moved! The van rocked slightly!

He parked around the nearest corner. His hand, stark and gorgeously remorseless like an eagle's talon, grasped his weapon and plunged it deep in his jacket's sidepocket. Ah, the luscious tang of imminence in the night air! They in their grunting, swinish scorn of him, thinking themselves safe. To know he could creep near them, pluck off their nasty shell of secrecy, smash to putty their sneering softnesses till they bled and dribbled, swooning and collapsing in exquisite agonies of remorse and futile repentance!

He stepped out, feeling the swell and tug of mighty wings at his shoulders, and wing-buoyed he moved, his heels treading in creamy silence the would-be-betraying pavements.

He stood at the van's cab door. There were curtains behind the front seat, and even as he stared at them, they shivered. He shuddered, their undulation smoothly continued in his flesh; and looking down with casual sovereignty, he saw that the lock button stood tall and silver within the rolled-up window, obedient to his will.

Then he moved, knowing his own speed and clarity compared to the dazed, flesh-tranced time he was thrusting into: he, a celestial falcon; they, groggy and a-blush with blood, like vermin too gorged even to flinch. He seized the handle, thumbed home the button, pulled wide the door and vaulted up to jam his knees into the driver's seat. He swept aside the curtain, and two matted heads popped up from the broken pane of streetlight that fell and shattered on two bodies. The Angel of Death squeezed out a bullet from his magnum and felt the delicious lurch of its velocity jump from him and plunge through the skin and domed bone of the smaller head.

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With splendid fluid flexions of sinew and talon, with leisurely largess, he hammered both those skulls repeatedly, distributing the roaring gouts of lead to follow them through their spasms of recoil.

Engelmann drove home wanderingly, whimsically. He went to an all-night market for a six-pack of root beer, doubled back to buy a newspaper at a liquor store, went to a drive-through taco stand, and after elaborate polite discussion with the woman behind the clown-faced intercom, ordered a vanilla shake. These movements were his way of relishing his almost dizzying freedom—freedom to prowl these streets, or to quit them, to pull up and in one smooth climb, to exit them, whenever he chose.

Meanwhile, that intercosmic tuft of thistledown was drifting over the very neighborhood that Engelmann had just visited with his wrath. This being had, among his colleagues, a complex personal designation which involved simultaneous articulations in a multiple of electromagnetic frequencies. The phonetic aspect of this designation was, roughly, "Siraf."

Siraf, then, just as Engelmann was ordering his vanilla shake, selected the rooftop of a tall and partly disused building as a covert in which to pass his inert phase. The Archives required that all fieldworkers, upon entering an alien sphere, lie passive for a time, before engaging in research on the indigenous life-forms. By this tactic the worker could gain some assurance that they had entered a sufficiently stable configuration, before he expended valuable research energies on mimicry and transactional involvment. Each worker could carry only limited quanta of metamorphic power, and even in the best circumstances, only brief investigations were possible. Hence the care taken to avoid the waste of partial readings aborted by disruptive local phenomena.

Siraf adopted a spherical shape and rolled himself against the tarry brick parapet of the rooftop. He immediately initiated telescans of the nearest lying indigenes. Although most of these seemed to be dormant, and all were in any case too distant for fine-focused observations, the young scholar was able to add much to the morphological program provided him by the Archives for this race. That program had been in truth the merest sketch, and Siraf improved the hours of inertia by fleshing it out with studious encodements of the data he was able to gather.

This kind of preparation could only go so far in alleviating the inevitable obscurity and confusion of alien interactions. He could expect to assimilate most of the physical structure, locomotor routines, much vocabulary, and so be able, on emerging from dormancy, to mimic and to initiate transactions with the autocthones. But it would only be *during* that brief and energy-exorbitant period of mimicry and close range interaction that he

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could fine-tune his observations.

For example, Siraf had soon enzymatically recorded much of the local speech. But when it came time actually to effect relationships with the natives, he would still have no clue to the motile and behavioral patterns which this vocabulary served. He would know how to express many concepts, but would have no guide to what concepts it was appropirate to express under what circumstances. A fieldworker could come onstage in perfect costume, so to speak, but with no hint of his role, or even, in many cases, of what kind of thing a role might *be*.

It should give some sense of Siraf's excellence as a scholar to report that within a few busy hours of assimilations and inferences, he had arrived at a closely reasoned choice of form. Of the two sexes, it appeared that the larger, the "male," enjoyed a significantly greater degree of mobility and social initiative than did the "female." (For example, the dreams of several nearby dormant females were full of this very theme.) To this finding he added the fact that the sexual drive of this race seemed remarkably dominant among its impulses—a circumstance that boded well for his chances of getting much valued insights into its reproductive rituals. Altogether, a young male with high mating potential seemed indicated for a maximum probability of successful interaction. The specifications he arrived at were, in the native units: height, 6'4"; weight, 215 lbs.; age, 24 years; muscular and vascular systems highly articulated; features, nordic; hair, blond.

Siraf was aware that many of his colleagues would condemn this choice by reason of its exceeding the norms of size, strength, and general aesthetic appeal by local standards. They would point out that an abnormal individual was not likely to elicit normative reactions. His atypicality would distort his findings.

But Siraf's heuristic methods were the reverse of conservative. He reasoned that there was no such thing as "situational purity." To experiment at all was to disrupt, distort. And since there was no way around it, why not *use* slight disruption? Let the fieldworker agitate a bit the hive he visits. Not traumatically, but to a degree that might intensify and multiply the scholar's involvements in his all too brief time for probing.

Throughout those hours when Siraf lay conceiving himself, it happened that Engelmann was doing very much the same thing. He was in his room on the top floor of an old apartment building. He lay on his mattress before the TV, propped to a half-sitting posture by pillows. He was alternately watching the tube and writing in a spiral notebook which he held against his raised knees.

"Freedom!" (he wrote) "It's a joke /miracle, a staggering simplicity! You just dare to take Justice, and the daring alone fills you with power. The mere

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daring-to-fly *is* the power of flight. I *can* fly. I *have* power over life, and freedom from death. Even if the Insect-Squads eventually do take me—"

A Jacusi ad came on and he stopped writing to watch it, having seen it twice already. It would repeat throughout the program, a late movie on a local channel. Two big-breasted girls in bikinis—one on the edge of the pool paddling her legs, one sitting in the water—laughed with a young man. He was neck-deep, and his trendy, mustachioed head bobbed on the bubbles just at the submerged girl's breast level. There was a voice-over pitch and addresses of the company's outlets rolled across the scene. When the ad was over, Engelmann had to re-read what he had written before he could go on:

"I won't be taken to the Poison Room. Oh, no! I'll go to the shining halls of Medicine. I'll be given soul-upholstering drugs. For my Freedom itself protects me. It's too "unreal" for the Little Folk. The very horror of what I do classifies it past the reach of punishment."

He stopped to watch the movie for a while. It was sci-fi, and there were spaceflight shots with starry backgrounds that exalted him. The ad returned. He watched it closely, and afterwards he wrote with a heat and fitfulness he had not shown:

"I do what I will. I paint the world as I will. Your skulls are my paintpots, bitches! I empty them with my rude and potent brush. I splash out frescoes of my revenge. Your cheating sneering little world is my palette. I'll make my masterpieces and lay them out to dry. And I'll have them displayed in the press as if it *were* no more than paint I splash around. And so it is! And so it is! I make it so, and so it is!"

Engelmann laid aside his notebook. He found that he ached to go down again, to swoop for another kill. That lovely blind red impetus had returned to him, his heart was engorged with it as with some bodily fluid.

It caused him a painful division of feeling. He had always loved to savor each deed both ways in time, first through a long anticipation and, after, to relish its echo through the expectant desolation of the city's renewed terror. Especially in this latter period he felt his tread to reverberate, gigantically, through the city. Then, spectral, huge, he lived in the hearts of seven million.

But desire was great upon him, and he lusted for a fierce, unparalleled abundance that would fill the air with the red debris of his redundant rage. After brief hesitation, he made the pact with himself to take further vengeance the following night.

Engelmann did not fall asleep until the afternoon of the next day, and he was still in the depths of his sleep when, at dusk, Siraf terminated his dormancy.

He rolled out from the brick parapet to a clear space on the tar and grav-

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el. There, again in compliance with Archivist tradition, Siraf uttered the Fieldworker's Vow prior to transmorphing. The articulation involved a phonetic aspect which sounded like lush, melancholy flute solos. Its cognitive content was, roughly:

"Having sworn to be a foundling
through the stars
I lie on yet another threshold.
I will remember, though I travel far.
I will store up as treasure all I behold."

He extended his mass into a slender ellipsoid six and a half feet long, and transmorphed.

He had perceived that the fiber-envelopes universally adopted by the indigenes were pretty widely available and thus did not warrant the energy expenditure that would be needed to fabricate them from his own substance. He found, as he lay making detailed adjustments of his new material apparatus that the pebbles of the rooftop painfully disrupted the curvature of his dorsal dermal surface. He sat up and brushed the little stones off the pale ridgings of back and shoulder muscle. His length of limb stretched his sinewing to gothic gauntness. He stood up and did a brisk dance of acquaintanceship with arms, legs, lungs. Then he walked to the parapet, leaned on it, and looked consideringly over the city.

Profitable as his dormant scanning had been, he now faced a demanding struggle for comprehension. The race was a complex one; close-range involvement with it was going to be a matter of frantic ad-libbing, a swift juggling of known variables with the always bewildering influx of new data. A local parallel for his plight would be a man running dizzily ahead to keep a crazy stack of dishes balanced in his hands. Siraf smiled, practicing the facial contortion that would be deemed appropriate to this image.

His first goal must be clothing. He had forseen that if his stature was unusual, so would commensurate enfiberments be, but he was counting on the abundance of the population to ensure that an appropriate envelope could be found fairly readily. He scouted now for the nearest considerable center of vital activity.

Siraf happened to be in a largely residential neighborhood, but it was a Saturday night, and three streets away was a very thriving block of bars, discos, dirty-book stores and rib joints. It was invisible to him, even from his thirty-story elevation, but he telepalped the psychic concentration, noting that high emotive levels seemed to prevail. The area should offer a rich field of options, at least. He picked out an alleyway route that should bring him to the middle of the block. Then he found the shadowiest side of the building and walked down the wall, risking this anomalous gravity-orientation because dark had fallen and it saved time.

The last alley Siraf followed de-

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bouched on the activity zone. He crouched behind some big packing crates just inside the alley mouth. Across the street he could see a bookstore and an Italian take-out stand. Within five seconds of his pausing in this covert, an individual pulled up to the curb in front of the bookstore, and he was not only amply clothed, but just about Siraf's size as well!

Surely this was one of those rare assignments where the fieldworker and his target cosmos were in a strange harmony, and luck blessed the scholar's labors. This convenient individual was of a darkly pigmented species which Siraf had rejected as a mimicry choice when he perceived that it enjoyed more limited options of social interaction than the paler ones. The man wore a broad-brimmed leather hat, a pirate shirt of maroon silk, leather pants and calf-high Peter Pan boots. He also wore a gold watch and a gold pendant and several fat gold rings. The Eldorado he sat in, all burnished chrome, glowed on the pavements. He sat behind the wheel, and after a few moments two brightly and scantily dressed young women sauntered up to speak to him through his half-open window.

The night was charged with the psychic effluvia of highly agitated organisms. A disturbing act, if swift and decisive, should pass the least disruptively in such an atmosphere. Some initial traumatizing of the natives was permissible if it was localized in its effect and potentiated a more immediate entry into full interaction with them elsewhere. Siraf began to increase the density of his hands and arms.

It took several moments to achieve a massiveness sufficient to deal with the glass and steel of the Cadillac. The girls strolled off again. The man sat adjusting his tape deck. Siraf gauged him to be perhaps an inch taller and twenty pounds heavier than himself. He realized that when the man's enfiberments had been removed, he would experience the atmospheric temperature as a great discomfort. The large boxes behind which the scholar crouched were full of shredded wood, and he decided they should answer nicely for insulation. His arms were ready. He straightened up and strode towards the Eldorado.

There was a fair number of people on the sidewalks, but all at some distance. The nearest were the two girls. Both gave amazed shouts, and one of them made a merry, obscene gesture of admiration. The well-dressed man became aware of Siraf a fraction later than his two employees. He was, however, a quick-thinking man. He took in the nude stranger's sheetings of stomach muscle, the machine-like power of his thighs, his dreamy and absorbed gait — and he locked both doors and twisted the key in the ingition.

Siraf, telepalping the mechanism, inhibited the spark. He plunged his hands through the windowglass, took

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a crushing grip on the steel of the door, and ripped it entirely out of its snug frame. He placed it as neatly as possible on the roof of the car. Then he reached inside for the man, who was just then crawling through the farther door, and seized him by shoulder and thigh. He spoke several reassurances which he had prepared in advance:

"Come along now,' he said soothingly. "Nothing to worry about. This won't take a minute, and you'll be plenty warm afterwards."

The man gave him a long, horrified glance. Siraf found pressure points in shoulder and leg which canceled resistance and allowed him to lift the man out. "Outsy-daisy," he said, uncertain of the expression. He hoisted the man straight-arm over his head and carried him to the sidewalk. There he sat him down, leaned him against the wall, and started to remove his clothes. A fascinated crowd was forming, at a respectful distance. Siraf took and donned the hat, the shirt, the trousers, and, last, the boots. He left the jewelry on the man.

When he was dressed—and it was done in moments—he picked up the still-quiescent donor and carried him to the alley mouth. There Siraf bedded him snugly amidst the shredded wood in the largest packing crate. He tucked the insulator around him till only the head lay visible, like a set jewel, or shipped fruit, in the midst of the excelsior. Since he had already grossly violated behavioral norms, he took his leave of the crowd, after an amicable salute, by running straight up the wall of the nearest building and disappearing over the top, eighteen stories above.

He knew that the indigenes' communication system was relatively swift and efficient, and so he traveled several miles, overleaping streets, when he had to, at the darkest points and most carefully chosen instants. He did not think a concerted pursuit likely in a place not only populous but rife, as far as he could gather, with transactions of the most intense and violent kind. He fled on nevertheless, conscientiously safeguarding his researches, and it so happened that as he fled across one particular roof, his passage sent down an errie drumbeat into the sleep of that other alien, Engelmann, the Angel of Death.

Just then he lay in the dense webbing of a lustful nightmare where ghastly, sprawling spiders envenomed and sucked away his flesh. The hammering of those feet kicked through and scattered the nightmare like gusts tearing up a sluggish ground mist and sent sad, turbulent dream-reverberations through him. He felt that desperately vital news, cosmic tidings, were being sped by messenger to a distant city, where there would be a vast rejoicing. And meanwhile he, Engelmann, lay in a living grave upon some giant plain, and saw the runner pass him with that news, and struggled to rise and follow, and could not, could never reach that

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vast rejoicing.

As for Siraf, about a mile beyond this new coincidence he slowed and found a high building for reconnoitering. He decided that his entry point would be a park some blocks distant, and when he had approached it and studied it from a new rooftop perch just across the street, he felt fully confirmed in his decision. Singles bars, cabarets, movies fringed the leafy square, whose pathways and benches were as lively as the surrounding sidewalks.

Long unmoving, he spied that scene. With his fine-spun nets of telepulses he trawled and seined the swarming lagoon of psychic life below. His investigative powers were cruelly limited by distance, but such was the emotive unanimity of the crowd that he could read much from its sheer ambience. It was overwhelmingly obvious from what he saw — pairing rituals, symbolic self-exhibitions, musical mimicry of copulatory contortions — that the place was a hotbed of mating-related activities. It seemed the luck which had clothed him was not faltering.

In the Archives, mating transactions were highly prized as data for, among sexed organisms, they often provided a key to many other emotive patterns and social rituals in a given race's repertory. At the same time, they were recognized as the trickiest exchanges for a fieldworker to mimic, since cuing behavior and display symbolism was likely to be very subtly elaborated in such crucial interactions. But Siraf resolved that his daring would match his luck. He would take mating for his immediate aim. He adjusted his hat and took the stairs down to the street.

He followed the sidewalk for a short time before crossing over to the park. With every step he modulated more precisely his posture and gait to those prevailing and achieved a fuller acquaintance with the local vocalization system by rummaging in the vocabularies of those he passed. He accomplished, in a few hundred yards, great refinements in the facial and bodily techniques of confronting and moving among others. He also satisfied himself that most of the active pairing was going on in the park, and, accordingly, he soon crossed over.

It happened that a tall, exhilarated grad student named Jeannie Kudajzinsky had entered the park not long before Siraf did. Prior to doing so, she had enjoyed three stiff Bloody Marys at The Elevator Disco-Bar while watching the dancers with increasingly droll approval. Now she sat and watched the passers-by with a jaunty smile. She had spent the last five days, ten hours a day, in the library stacks. Her feeling was that the night was splendid and anything might happen.

It was from Jeannie that Siraf received his first unmistakable lead in the tangle of fleeting ideations he was combing through as he strolled the paths. He noted among her cerebral

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events his own image undressed and subjected to various erotic attentions. He circled round to pass her again in a few moments.

She wore body-emphasizing courting finery. Her mammary and gluteal bulges appeared precisely to fulfill the normative ideal, but her stature was sufficiently norm-excessive to make it likely that she was deprived of interaction and thus probably the more motivated towards it. She would stand about six feet tall. Fighting that inevitable pang, that forlorn sense of ignorance every investigator felt as he prepared to grapple closely with alien phenomena, Siraf stepped up to her bench and opened with an expression which he felt fairly sure was appropriate:

"Hello, my dear. You're looking lovely tonight."

Jeannie laughed. Her first disbelief at the approach of this beautiful nordic pimp became a giddy sense of *savoir-faire*, and she promptly countered him:

"You say that like you know how I look other times. You've been following me around, right?"

"Oh, no. I only just now picked you out. Does your appearance change radically with the passage of time?"

"That's putting it mildly. Think how I'll look in forty years!"

Siraf was about to clarify that he meant over short periods, but Jeannie laughed with such gusto at her own retort that he was cued to discount the whole exchange. The image of himself sitting by her on the bench was recurring vividly in her cerebrations, attended by strong though ambiguous affect. Siraf sat down with a reassuring smile. He was aware of a verbal routine apparently designed for such a situation as this, and so he ventured it: "I was just passing, and I thought I'd stop by for a while and see how you are."

The woman's new laughter informed him that the formula did not apply.

"Well, that's wonderful," she gasped. "We don't get to see you much out this way." Jeannie was going to elaborate the joke when she was taken with a guilty awareness that, in her excitement and anxiety, she had done nothing but laugh at the man. "Listen," she said, "are you a foreigner? Your accent is perfect, I mean you have no accent at all, but your...your idioms are a little funny—Christ! That doesn't sound like I'm putting you down, does it?"

"I'm not the slightest bit put down. In fact, I am a foreigner. I'm Norwegian." Jeannie's turn of speech had given him his cue, and as he spoke he read the nationality in her expectations.

"You certainly look it," she said. "I mean that as a compliment."

"Oh, yes," said Siraf, adopting a grave manner and feeling with new keenness his ignorance. He decided it was safest to answer tautologically and countercompliment: "A compliment is a very pleasant thing to receive. Thank

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you. You are a very desirable woman. I mean that as a compliment in return."

Jeannie could find no sign in his face that he was joking, and as she smiled incredulously at him, he went on, developing the seemingly gratifying theme of her physical form:

"For instance, something the observer immediately notes about you is the abundant development of your breasts and your posteriors. Your face has a delightlful symmetry. It is...foxlike." He caught a clear suggestion from her here, as he hesitated. "Moreover I see that you are unusually large, and I thought this a wonderful coincidence, because I too am abnormally large-bodied."

From resurgent hilarity, Jeannie had subsided to bemused attention. All shadings of irony or affront were missing from the man's impossible words. There was an honesty, a tender objectivity in them such as she had never heard in a man's voice. An Innocent? A Noble Savage? If this was illusion, as the whole man seemed illusory in his perfection, she decided to rise to it, as on a dare, and take it at face value. Had she only been pretending to believe that anything might happen tonight?

"You are very sweet to tell me the things you do," she answered. "You have this marvelous sincerity. I hate that word, but it's what you have. Furthermore, you're beautiful, physically I mean, as far as I am concerned. What do you say to that?"

She smiled in his eyes, half humor, half suspense. She did not know what to expect, as if she were Baucis in the myth and had just given a nudge of collusion to one of the disquised gods in her house. Siraf, finding no clue, returned her own formula:

"You are very sweet to tell me."

"Most men wouldn't react that way," she said.

Siraf had a swift fear that the woman was objectively rating the credibility of his performance—knew him to be a performer, in other words, though he found no such image in her. "They would not?" he asked, trying to express innocent, grave alarm. It made Jeannie laugh again in spite of herself.

"Don't be so shocked! It's beautiful that you answered that way. See? Again beautiful. See how you're racking up points?"

The game metaphor, which he had noted as a common turn of mind, locally, oriented him, and he recognized that performance here was humorously commented on without signifying doubt of the performer's genuineness. He laughed, and Jeannie felt a burst of *deja vu*. Long ago, in high school, before she had become (as she like to phrase it) "a certified giantess," she had often sat in a car with a certain basketball player. There had been in him a similar ease of acceptance, and with him she had felt an exhilarating, unthreatened freedom of thought and body. He would always start by inviting her for a burger and a coke....

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"Well," said Siraf, "how about driving out for a burger and coke?"

This almost eerie echoing of her reverie at first made her stare and then made her jump up, as if to throw off bodily the last encumbrances of cynicism and disbelief. She snuffed the night air appreciatively, and said:

"Wonderful! I'd love a drive! I'd love a hamburger!"

They walked down the paths to the sidewalk. The curb was parked solid, and Siraf was confident that an adequate vehicle could be procured. As they passed he telepalped each car for fuel and performance levels and settled on a new black Cadillac halfway down the block. He probed its ignition and, as they approached it, started it up. Jeannie's surprise told him that the performance was anomalous. Hastily he searched out a reassuring tag for such occasions:

"Oh, you know how it is. It sometimes does that."

"Oh, yes," Jeannie nodded emphatically. "I know what you mean. Sometimes they just get eager to get going."

He now made out the proper sequence from her anticipatory ideations and, springing the locks with telepulses, opened the passenger door and let her in.

At just about this time, Engelmann was slowly awakening. He had left the TV on and its rising to the more hectic pitch of prime time was what gradually wedged him out of his sleep. He stumbled to the bathroom, came back to his mattress only slightly less groggy, and plunged his hand into a cardboard box on the floor near the bed. From amidst candy bars, cheese-n-cracker paks, bags of chips and boxes of cookies, he drew out several packages of cupcakes, some rolls of miniature donuts, and a quart of chocolate milk, which he liked warm.

He breakfasted. Some of his mind followed the beloved food down to his insides; some of his mind carefully watched the backgrounds of the tired cop-series for streets and locales he knew; but most of it peered queasily back into the dream-tangle he had just crawled out of.

All those Things That Should Not Be — all that spiderous, bristly grappling. Granted, such things squirmed eternally behind the veil of Nightmare. But why should he plunge so often into them? Why should his thought so tirelessly conceive the worst it could? Wasn't it after all only the price of his greatness, his terrible freedom? Engelmann licked his fingers and, with a musing air, took up his notebook.

"Lo!" (he wrote) "I've burst from the shadow-show called Human Action. That pantomime! It's all cringing, all shying-away-from, all writhing-to-please! So I've torn free — I've swung at those shadow-manikins and smashed them to tatters, to rags and lust." He paused, corrected "lust" to "dust," and sped on.

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"But just for this reason, the shadow-dimness no longer protects me. I see the real infinity of possibility, infinite possibility both Dark and Light. That's why so many nightmares come with freedom!"

He stopped to savor this high pitch of understanding for a moment and the feel of archangelic overview quickened his heart to full wakefulness.

"Oh, yes, I pay!" (he wrote) "Power isn't free! It's not just given away! Dues? I guess I know about paying dues!"

He shook his head here with a wry smile of self-admiration.

"Oh, there will be rest at the end! I admit I've had that consolation to stiffen me against the nightmares. Everyone earns a rest, and for me there'll be the long hours of protection and nourishment. Institutional life! All shining and brilliant with the lovely psychic varnishes of drugs!

"But for now, there is still the struggle! I'm not so ready to give up the power of flight—not so fast, whatever it costs! So for now let the dues be reckoned, and I'll just pay up on demand."

All the latent feeling of the nightmare was dispersed now, and the Angel of Death was fully himself, voluptuously stretching out the wings of his over soaring irony. And, like the splendid, sun-burnished cock in the fresh morn, he suddenly craved to tread some squawking, fluster-feathered she-bird and hammer the heat of his blood into her pleasure-devastated flesh.

So the Angel of Death took up the image of his beloved and laid her in a shadowy place behind his eyelids. He laid her so that the shadows concealed her head. Her body cringed and shivered under his taloned, regal feasting. She rolled her dark-smeared head with her cherished agony. And her clutching, penetrated flesh — aided by Engelmann's deft right hand — tugged and tugged on the root of his pleasure and at last, powerfully, quite plucked it out of those divine loins.

The Angel of Death rose and washed and changed his clothes. He began to clean his gun, and as he did so, fell to musing again on the ease and quietude of a mental institution. This line of thought shortly led him to so piercing-sweet a mirth that he dropped his work and snatched up his notebook again. He wrote:

"It's like being a giant that no one sees rightly. The doctors will come up to me, and they'll talk to my knees, thinking they see me. I roar down to them: 'Here I am up here, you sniveling jerks!' They nod compassionately to my knees and answer: 'Yes, these inflated ideas — they are your punishment as much as your pleasure. Tragically for others, you've been led to cherish these ideas of exaggerated potency and now you are compelled to enact them.

"I boom back jovially: 'Doctors! My exaggerations are made true by

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your sons' and daughters' blood. I *am* gigantic with it. Up here, Doctors! Up here I am!'

"'Yes,' they say, 'that is the horror of your condition — your utter separateness. You're trapped in a void where others are no realler, no more comfort to you, than furniture.'

"How answer to be heard? This dogged, blind, idiot compassion is of course only the child of fear. Everyone on earth uses others like furniture, cautiously at first, then abusively, once familiarity sets in. I have made grosser and more daring uses of them and admit it's for my whim, and through this I've reached another order of being, another order of happiness. I could roar out louder than an H-bomb and they'd still be straining their ears at me to catch the nuances. It's just this simple: I'm the crazy guy who happens to *be* Napoleon. I *am* the Angel of Death."

Engelmann read what he had written, re-read it, and at length, took up the gun again. When it was cleaned and reloaded he got up and turned off the TV. He pulled on a jacket and stuffed his magnum into one pocket of it. Into the other he shoved three candybars from his cardboard box and turned off his light.

Fearlessly he walked down the dark flights and fearlessly out into the gusty night. He stabbed and twisted with his key, and his deep-chested car came to life. The Angel of Death was again on the city, and he meant to hover wheresoever he would — to stand and stoop with Olympian randomness wherever the covert stirred beneath his eye.

Siraf, for much of their drive, was absorbing navigational procedures and signals, while following Jeannie's ideations closely for clues to his route. Simultaneously, of course, he was encoding everything, for in this he never ceased. Jeannie talked about herself, luxuriating in a sense that she could say anything that came to her and yet only half attending to what she did say. For her sense of sexual-fantasy-come-true had not faltered. The very turnings of the car had a dreamlike congruence with her desires. All the shopping districts and showpiece streets of the city which she loved to see at night streamed past them now, while through it all Siraf sat stately, beautiful and grave, receiving the details of her life with his odd, earnest answers. The sensation of unreal rightness peaked when he steered them into one of the few old-fashioned drive-ins still operating in the city. In her high school days they had been the norm, before the coming of the drive-through.

Siraf handled the opening meal transactions fairly smoothly, using his foreigner's prerogative to ask for details of procedure when he failed to palp clear indications. He watched her handling of the food when it arrived, and aped it.

"How did you start the car from outside?" Jeannie asked. He read her back the hypothesis she mentally

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rehearsed in self-answer.

"Remote control," he said and, on a further hint, significantly tapped his empty pocket. He bit into his cheeseburger, far too hard. It ejected a gout of sauce through its greasy diaperings and splattered the chest of his shirt.

When Jeannie laughed, he joined her, causing her to apply her napkin with guilty solicitude, and turned on the lights to bring the carhop. She was an older woman. Pointing to his shirt, Siraf told her:

"The cheeseburger squirted it."

"Look, sir. We make them all the same," she said. "They don't squirt other people."

He nodded. "I see. Perhaps I bit it too forcefully."

The woman stared and, seeing his candid gaze, her brow darkened.

"Then, again," he offered, "it is possible that I was holding it incorrectly." Jeannie leaned forward quickly.

"Could we just get some water please?"

She helped him wipe the silk clean, pressing her free hand against his chest to tauten the fabric. The tactile influx she experienced weakened a complex image in her that Siraf noted.

Here was demonstrated an incorrigible element of inaccuracy affecting all fieldworkers' relations with the more highly elaborated conscious forms. The image, which recurred in her thoughts during the meal, was of copulation in the back seat of a car on a breezy night; the car was parked on a street flanked by sycamore trees and lit by old-fashioned streetlamps.

Siraf took this ideation as a simple, projected goal, though Jeannie did not clearly visualize her partner in it. The assumption was reasonable, on the grounds of the image's consonance with their actual situation: it was night, there was a light breeze, they had a car.

In fact Jeannie was savoring a fantasy. The spilled sauce, the heat of skin felt through a thin shirt, had renewed certain memories of her basketball player. They had never parked in such a place as she pictured, however — the street was added from childhood walks in another city, where she had lived for a time with an aunt. This sensual, nostalgic compound, mixing memory and desire, was in no sense a project. Jeannie feared the Angel of Death as much as anyone.

In the event, this mistake did not prejudice the transaction, but in terms of analytic accuracy it was a major misreading. And the Archives fully recognized the inevitability of such errors on the theoretical level. In the field, the urgent thing was always to identify the subject's dominant psychic configuration. The matrix this arose from, the manner of its emergence from less articulated strata of consciousness, were bypassed as often as not for simple lack of time to trace and analyze them, even when the fieldworker had not made an erroneous inference, as Siraf had. The ongoing

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anatomical analysis of the subject and observation of his environment constantly demanded the worker's attention and made reassessment of plausible psychic interpretations an ill-affordable luxury.

Thus it was that Siraf proposed they drive to "...a tree-lined street, and park there." It was his good luck that the fear this raised in Jeannie had, to counteract it, the magic of his unfailing closeness to her thought. What she could never have projected for herself came differently from this other. Poised between her fear and the offer of her dream made real, she suddenly felt she was being given that clear choice that occurred so often in the myths she studied. For the daring, revelation. For the daunted, drab endurance. The sense of impossibility pervading everything about Siraf she took as her signal that here was a crucial challenge to her faith and recklessness. She must dare to choose enchantment over safety.

A somewhat shabby reflection made the daring easier and, after they had driven a short while, she brought it out both to confirm it and to exorcise its little ugliness:

"I guess it's kind of a morbid thing to do," she said abruptly out of a silence. "I mean about that Angel of Death character. But you know, you calculate: the week just after one of those killings is statistically the safest time. It's ghoulish I guess, but you've got to think like that. You can't let those things rule your life."

Siraf was preoccupied with internally reviewing the sexual apparatus he would shortly have to employ, for he palped high oxygen concentrations nearby and guessed they were approaching heavily treed neighborhoods. He gathered, distractedly, that the "Angel of Death" awakened strong avoidance reactions and that he was a kind of public figure. His name was not associated in her with any clear facial or bodily image, but rather with written accounts too elliptically evoked to admit piecing out.

Jeannie had quelled her own fear. Thus easily was this phantom vanquished, whose only reality to her was a series of news photos of meaningless curbsides with police and stretchers. But as fear dwindled to insubstantiality, she was pleased to poke at it with little jabs of theory, noticing the while that Siraf was experimentally stiffening his procreative member. (He was astonished at the rigidity which the flaccid protruberance was capable of attaining.)

"It's really amazing to think that what that character does is essentially a substitute for, you know, sex. It's a classic pattern, I mean apparently it pops up all the time — I mean *all* the time. You've heard of it, the weapon's the symbolic organ, right? He's displaying his potency to the woman by killing her. There's the equation of sex and pain, death is the orgasm he causes. I guess sometimes you feel vengeful, but what's the point of kill-

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ing someone like that? It would be just as cruel and pointless as what he does to others."

Just then Siraf was busy appreciating for the first time what a powerfully engrossing phase of experience sexual engagement was for this race. As he tested the relevant aspects of his neural apparatus — that is to say, almost all of it — he saw that he faced a turbulent adventure. Perhaps a fit image for this stout spirit, as he faced the strange cerebral uproar that would shortly engulf him, would be that of a beginning swimmer facing huge waves which he must, for the first time, ride.

Nevertheless he was, in a half-attending way, fascinated by this strange ritual variant of the mating pattern. It appeared to be a cultural institution that was abhorred, but of sufficient permanence to generate a theoretical tradition. That he was dealing, on this planet, with a highly symbolic sentience, he had seen immediately. But a symbolic system that could substitute death for the process of insemination would be a startling oddity to add to the Archives' store. Then Jeannie's train of thought became strongly and unequivocally mating-directed. He sought, amidst towering, leafy sycamores and old-style streetlights, a place to park.

Thus it was that Jeannie Kudajzinsky became a point of intersection, of convergence, for the two starry nomads abroad in that night. Unburdened by all sense of antecedent and consequence, she enjoyed fluid and explosive embraces and intermittences of warm enclaspment during which she watched the gold-brown sycamore leaves where the sparse lights splashed them with visibility. Of the two who converged on her, Engelmann, even in the instant of his actually seeing her, posessed her only as an abstraction, while Siraf was so busily encoding her (and his own) electrochemical activity that he almost ceased to perceive her simple bodily presence at all. Between these two potencies, she lived her dream of love alone.

Siraf, for his part, was humbly amazed at the extreme aesthetic capacities that were being revealed to him. Their copious, spasmodic fluid exchanges he found to be among the most dynamic transactions he had ever observed to fall within the repertory of a race's routine behaviors. So desperately focused was his attention that the brief impingement of a strong psychic source outside that focus came as a slight shock to him. The signal he caught, as the pair of them rested, was a very intense ideation of a faceless pair coupling in a car. Siraf found the coincidence striking. The ideator was moving at a vehicular rate and passed from range almost as soon as Siraf had identified his thought. Then Jeannie's slow, rocking demands recommenced.

Siraf re-entered the labyrinth of his borrowed form. Jeannie, splendid and

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abandoned, rode his lap until, all at once, she drove herself greedily to climax. He followed suit.

She lay against him. She spoke thickly into his chest. "It's astonishing. Having exactly what I want so easily. But then you're like a dream. A wet dream."

"A wet dream. Is that an idiom?"

She sat up and laughed. "I don't think so, dear. I don't know what else you call them. Nocturnal emissions, I guess, would—"

The light in the car came on. It was Siraf's doing, and what had moved him to do it had gone unnoticed by Jeannie, so that at first all her startlement was at the sudden illumination. Then, following Siraf's eyes, she saw the gun and squinting face behind it just outside the window. She saw this through the image of herself and Siraf mirrored on the glass—saw how she straddled him and gaped, saw how her gape began to become a scream—all these last readings of the world she took before the gun fired. When it did, alarm had activated only the slightest muscular resistances in her, and the slug's impact snatched her off the scholar's thighs and flung her slack as a doll against the farther door.

For both the superhuman wanderers who were thus brought together face-to-face for the first time, this was a moment almost impossibly charged with meaning. On Siraf's side, so surprised had he been that he was still scrambling along a nanosecond behind the attacker's cerebral flow. He had hit the light in a reflexive attempt to maximize data of the transaction he suddenly realized was at hand. During the first shot, and Jeannie's falling, and the subsequent instant that the eyes stared over the gun at him through the hole in the glass, his mind sprinted to get abreast of developments: (a) Jeannie was dead. (b) This was beyond doubt precisely the mating variant, and the practitioner of it, she had spoken of. (c) He himself was just sufficiently entangled with her legs to inhibit by a critical instant his extricating himself. (d) The man was now squeezing the trigger again, and the slug would surely reach Siraf's skull. (e) Therefore, he must of necessity again exceed behavioral norms, to preserve the viability of his mimicked apparatus.

The confrontation found Engelmann likewise somewhat stunned. There had been that sudden blooming of light within the car, just as he was stealing near, infernal yellowish light falling on those splendid lengths of limb, those heroic loins all notched and knotted with the goatish strength of lust; there had been her atalantean breasts nosing like lillies from the rumpled calyx of her pushed-up clothes, and his luciferian face. Engelmann felt that he had stumbled upon the very Archetype of the crime that it was his divinity to scourge. He had uncovered daemons, or demigods, at the coupling. Here was the two-backed Beast itself, the Enemy, divine,

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in its way, as the Angel of Death was. Here was the test, and he would meet it. Exalted, he raised his massy magnum at her staring, not-yet-fearful eyes, and bravely, steadily, mightily, he smote her with fire and ruin. And, lo, she was hurled down by the power of his tool and cast below in blood and darkness. And then Engelmann swung that godly tool on the goatish colossus. Here, for an instant, the Angel of Death bore with his naked eyes the stare of the enemy. In that hawk-browed gaze the Angel saw no fear, only a bright, unreadable concentration. Then the Angel of Death gave battle, fearing not, the song of supreme combat in his ears. He pumped out roaring destruction into the eyes of the Enemy.

This was the beginning of the Angel's ordeal. Here commenced That Which Should Not Be. The range was close, and the shot sprayed what seemed to be the whole back of the man's head against the black tuck-and-roll and the windshield behind him. But even as Engelmann turned to flee his triumphant work, that spray of pulverized bone and brain leapt off the upholstery, jumped off the glass, leaving it unmarked save for the bullet's exit hole, and sped back, recohering in air like a convergent bee-swarm, to reconstitute the gold-haired spheroid of the titan's head.

Seeing that face reknit, and the dark, shattered eyes resume their stare — seeing this ruptured the very soul of the Angel of Death. A vital tissue of belief, a deep and unsuspected faith, was torn in him. His mind bled horror which flooded thought and swept it down dreadful channels that had long been dug in him, and lain waiting. The Angel of Death ran, flinging away his gun, and making water in his chaotic muscular exertions to escape.

He hauled himself behind the wheel of his car, left idling a half block down the street. He loosed the brake and grabbed the stick shift and...waited.

He could not flee, plunge off into the madness now alive in him, as long as a hope remained that he had dreamed. If that black car in his rearview did not stir, if the moments lengthened and nothing happened, he had hallucinated and was free. If not, Engelmann knew with an eerie certainty what would happen: that *thing*, only temporarily a man in form, would burst through the very steel of the car, surge out and, with a roar of Ragnarok, sprint after him. He waited, the gunfire utterly forgotten. That, and the police it might have summoned existed in another world, to which he could never return if he did not prove now to himself that only corpses lay in that black car.

Siraf was ready for immediate pursuit but sat still throughout Engelmann's sprint back to his car. He longed to give chase. On this lucky excursion, jackpot on jackpot of data were falling to his lot, and he meant to seize on this second one in any way he could, if only by getting a verbal report

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from the individual on the full meaning of his rite's bizzare symbolism.

But the female, Jeannie, had clearly abhorred in the abstract the fate that had now actually stricken her. Siraf very much wanted to fix her while it was still possible. He touched her long calves, still across his thighs, hating the wastage. The Archives most fundamental traditions abjured him not to do it — not at the cost of the new data and not when the first subject's loss was completely fortuitous. Siraf's ambition, and his dedication to the Archives, showed him Necessity, but he could not bring himself to move until absolutely the last moment, when the other's car should start to move, and he must run it down before it lost him.

And, then, it did *not* move! The aggressor waited down the street, visualizing a bizarre form of pursuit by Siraf, ideating with such intensity that the image came through clearly even at that range. Siraf was being invited into the ritual. What an amazingly flexible acceptance of the (to him) Impossible on the part of this attacker! For he was now playing the game of retreat and coy pause, and waiting to be chased by his victim!

There would be time then after all. He began increasing his bodily density. Simultaneously he sought out by thermal palp every least fragment of Jeannie's head throughout the car's interior. The finer fluids had cooled quickly on the glass and metal, but all retained critical traces of warmth. The reassembly was telekinetic, his body motionless in its process of mass-gain. He referred to his enzymatic record for his exhaustive read-outs of her cranio-cerebral morphology. It was a work of delicate correlations, electrically swift. The chips and tissue-shreds each had to be minutely cleansed and neatly relodged in the dense three-dimensional puzzle. It took twenty-seven seconds. He sanitized, sutured and sealed the countless seams with thermal telebeams, infinitely fine. When he saw her eyes open and struggle for focus, he was content, and as, just then, his density had reached its peak, he propped her on the seat, pulled up his trousers, and hurled himself against the car door.

For Engelmann the healing seconds of silence and inactivity had almost closed his horror's wound. He breathed deeply and pulled the car into gear, scarcely yet daring to believe he had been delivered from a mythic retribution, delivered from the Impossible. Then in the mirror he saw the Cadillac's side bloom outward and the giant emerge from the tattering steel and spraying glass amidst a roar of Ragnarok. With a howl of acceleration his deep-chested car fled away.

Now inexorably That Which Should Not Be came to pass. Precisely as he dreaded, the giant began to sprint after him, and though Engelmann shortly hit fifty, his Enemy gained. He drove at and beyond the limit of control, sliding and careering through

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turns that ought by all odds to have destroyed him. The giant gained. The Angel of Death was Phaethon now, dragged broken-limbed among the stars, a mortal suddenly seized by real gods.

"Real Gods!" He screamed it aloud. "No!" Had he not then believed his own godhead? Yes. No. Yes—but *not like this*. It was partly a *game!* Only the deaths had been real — ordinary deaths. His divinity had only been...poetic!

But there was no holding on to this late truth, for it was truth no more. He had flown upwards on real wings, had for a fact soared up to where the Impossible lodged. For here it was a dozen strides back of him, its face an image of mythic calm while its legs and arms drove it forward as furiously as the connecting rods on a locomotive's wheels. The Angel of Death had been just angel enough, had had just power enough, to damn himself. At home there was a machine gun, and to that poor scrap of potency, the limit of his defense, Engelmann now bent all his thoughts. He threw a left turn too fast, sideswiped a parked car, and roared on, dribbling glass and clattering with popped chrome.

Siraf stopped. He had by now returned to normal mass, but even so he found that the effort required to maintain this speed would shortly do serious damage to his adopted anatomy. He had read a clear destination in his attacker's thoughts, including a map thither which the later had fleetingly rehearsed to himself. The distance remaining to be covered was not great.

So the young scholar settled to an easy jog, husbanding his forces. He had received premonitory glimpses of his quarry's desire — of the scenario which the man waited to play out when Siraf joined him in his room. He foresaw that new mimicries would be required, and that this investigation would almost surely exhaust his research energies — hardly a misfortune, considering the choice insights he had been granted. Especially this second find. Could a rarer, more paradoxical and self-destructive rite exist, than this his recent attacker flew to consummate?

And at length, when Siraf stood in the vestibule of Engelmann's apartment building and read him clearly where he lay seven stories above, the scholar found in full what he had guessed at, an astonishing necro-erotic ritual with himself as co-celebrant. He was indeed expected to transform his body — and how could the man have educed so unerringly his power to do so? More, how could he so smoothly accept it, beyond the capacities of his kind though it was, and incorporate it in his passionate fantasies? Not for the first time in his career, Siraf acknowledged with awe in his heart the endless creativity of consciousness as he had met with it throughout its polymorphic, transgalactic sprawl. He deactivated the lights of the stairwell and

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caused his form to melt into several smaller ones. Slowly these climbed the carpeted stairs, with a whispery, prickly noise, mounting multiply to probe this second earthly mystery.

Could a more dreadful, even tragic misunderstanding be conceived? It was lunatic expectation, not desire, that powered those intense imaginings of Engelman's! But how could Siraf, speed-reading his impossibly involved text, be blamed? The Angel's visions sprang from his real (and all too unreal) encounter, but the grafting where hallucination sprouted from fact was missed by the scholar. And since the half-sexual terror that now flooded the man's nerves was not grossly different from the half-sexual rage of his initial assault, here too Siraf saw continuum and concentrated on reading his scripted role in the rite. Repugnance he surely felt, but professionalism squelched it. He had already gathered that no kind of emotional violence should surprise him, coming from this turbulent species.

Somewhat later, near the stillest hour of the night, Jeannie Kudazjinsky stepped through a great hole of shredded steel and stood on asphalt and broken glass, an alien in this ended and continued world. It might have been one of those ritual womb-symbols that she emerged from, she thought, for she found herself reborn—into the Impossible.

She walked along the sidewalk, very slowly. All was emptiness, holocaust hadn't raised a single siren. Had she died in fact, and were all these buildings crypts? An hour and more she had sat in the ruined car, remembering, and no one had passed.

She decided that the most terrible aspect of it all, the thing that could conceivably drive her mad, was that there should be nothing more, that she should now have to walk back into her life and simply resume it. She looked at the big sycamore leaves applauding the wind. Like vile arthritic hands they covetously rubbed the brass-nippled streetlamps. Panic began to radiate from a point-source in her stomach's pit. Just then she was spoken to — distinctly, voicelessly:

"Jeannie. Be comforted. This is Siraf. I am an extraterrestrial and your experiences were simple realities, every one."

She looked straight up — from instinct, as the telepulses bore no directional trace. Ten feet above her, under a vaulting of branches, hung that tuft of transcosmic thistledown, Siraf's traveling shape. Jeannie gazed. After a long and chaotic moment, she *was* comforted. Softly she said:

"You were...."

"In a human shape. We mated. The sexual homicide — his name was Engelmann — killed you. I repaired you. Then I indulged Engelmann in his fantasies. He is dead, my dear. Barring the energy I need for my return, I am

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utterly depleted, and there was no fixing him. But from Engelmann I learned — too late for him — the proneness of your race to psychic trauma, and so I've taken care to explain things. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said. "But why....?"

"Scholarship. Please accept my thanks for your time and cooperation. I apologize for the inconvenience involved."

"I'm a scholar too!" she blurted. Sadness, and the lone Discoverer's exaltation, stretched her heart between them, while through all else and amazing to herself, she felt a piercing envy.

"Yes," Siraf responded. "And you have taught me much. Good-bye."

He was gone. "Good-bye," she said, an instant too late. And then once more, in a shout, the better to project her voice across the light-years: "Good-bye!"

After a moment, she spread her arms and did a sprawling, not to say gargantuan pirouette under the sycamore trees. She whooped with laughter, and at the quiet, coward streets where gunshots and fury had not raised a single stir of protest or of aid, she shook her fist and shouted: "Revelation! Great! But what the hell can I *do* with it?"

Engelmann sat on his mattress with his back against the corner he'd shoved his bed into, after bolting his door. He had the machine gun across his thighs and the TV on. He couldn't watch the TV however—only the door, whose terrible flimsiness was like an ongoing horror show that the tube could not compete with. That Which Should Not Be, *was*. Effortlessly, irresistibly, It took Its being and did Its will on man. Not any man. On *him* alone. Engelmann wept and ground his teeth together.

What was there not? What unspeakabilities, glimpsed in dreams, were not proven now? For he knew the true form of that which chased him. It was a trinity, three-in-one. Eight-legged things from the sniggering dark, come scuttling down from the poisonous, cobwebby stars. But he had not flown up there! Not truly! Why should they come down? That dreadful three-in-one — one for his face, one for his heart, one for his lions. He'd had no wings, not really! Only a costume made of others' blood, only a god-costume. Was that his crime, blasphemy? What wall, what puny dike of Possibility, was left to stand between himself and chaos now? All the rest of the world was safe in its fortress, only he — *was that a movement outside the door?*

Back inside the Fortress! Back inside! O World, let Engelmann back within the walls! Engelmann wants back in, dear world! Things are coming, things that will pierce his pitiful skin and corrode his precious heart with poisons!

Was that a bulging of the panel of the door?

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Oh, here is Engelmann, alone and naked! Take him in, he begs you; he is helpless, his water flows; oh, pick him up and cradle him out of harm! Momma! Not death! Not pain and death!

But something was piercing the door, soundlessly, as if it were clay, or cheese. And a blister was swelling from the ceiling, and another from the wall. Three tarantulas, big as German shepherds, hatched through wood and plaster; their shaggy legs whispered as they came tenderfooting towards him. One for his face. One for his heart. One for his loins. The gun, as they do in nightmares, failed to fire.

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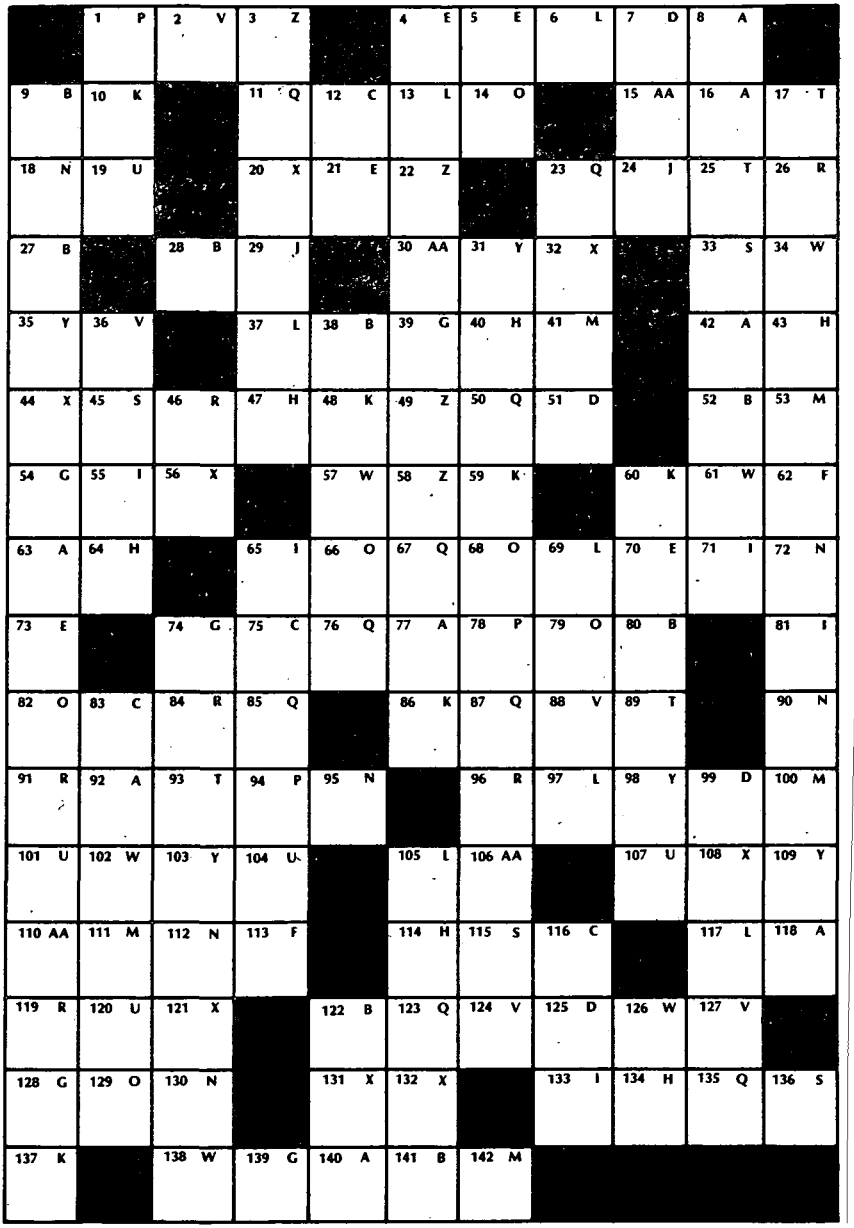

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Acrostic Puzzle

by Robert Payes

This puzzle contains a quotation from a science fiction story. First, guess the clues and write the word in the numbered blanks beside the clues. Put these letters in the matching blocks in the puzzle. (The end of the line is not necessarily the end of a word. Words end with black squares.) If your clue words are correct, you will see words forming in the puzzle blocks. If you can guess some of these words, put the letters into the blanks for the clues, over the appropriate numbers. This will help you to guess more words. The first letters of the correctly worked clues spell the name of the author and the title of the sf work from which the quotation is taken.

A. Star war author.

16	42	118	92	8	77	140	63

B. Talmudic "king of the devils."

38	122	52	28	141	80	9	27

C. "The Food Farm" author.

75	12	83	116

D. Wrote about Satanic baby.

51	14	7	99	125

E. Hal.

4	73	21	5	70

F. 007's enemy.

113	62

G. Source of LSD.

139	39	54	128	74

H. Novelized "The Invaders."

43	114	134	47	64	40

I. Universal speed limit.

71	55	65	133	81

J. Absorbed by GALAXY.

24	29

K. "Stardance" arachnid.

60	10	48	137	59	86

L. Bradburian game and country.

6	37	105	69	117	97	13

M. Every villain should be this.

100	53	142	111	41

N. Creator of OBO and Fee-5.

90	112	95	130	72	18

O. ____-IN.

79	66	129	68	82

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P. Recede.

94	1	78

Q. Terrestrial nematode.

76	50	67	123	11	23	87	85	135

R. Rock music "brothers."

26	91	119	96	84	46

S. Non-metric measure.

136	115	33	45

T. Winged victory.

25	93	89	17

U. Alaskan city with a "G."

104	101	120	107	19

V. Impudent UFO; flying _____.

127	124	2	88	36

W. Smidgen of food.

61	34	126	138	102	57

X. Opposite of Orient.

108	56	44	131	121	32	132	20

Y. Monster time.

103	109	98	31	35

Z. Artistic process (verb).

22	3	49	58

AA. _____-away.

110	30	106	15

Solution will appear in September issue.

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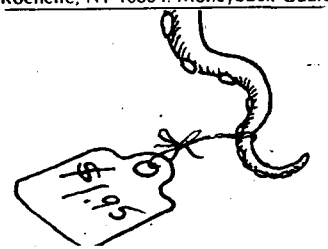

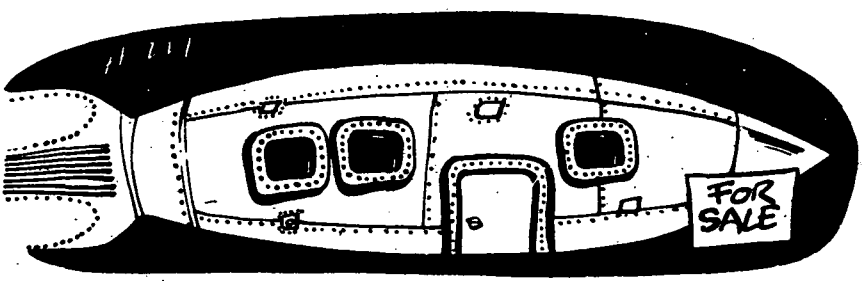

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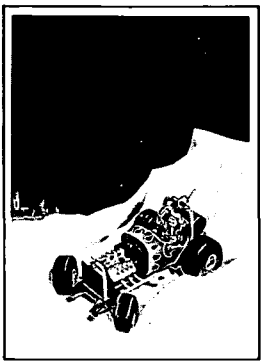

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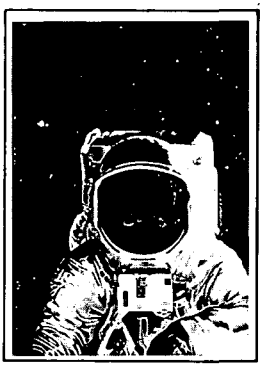

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